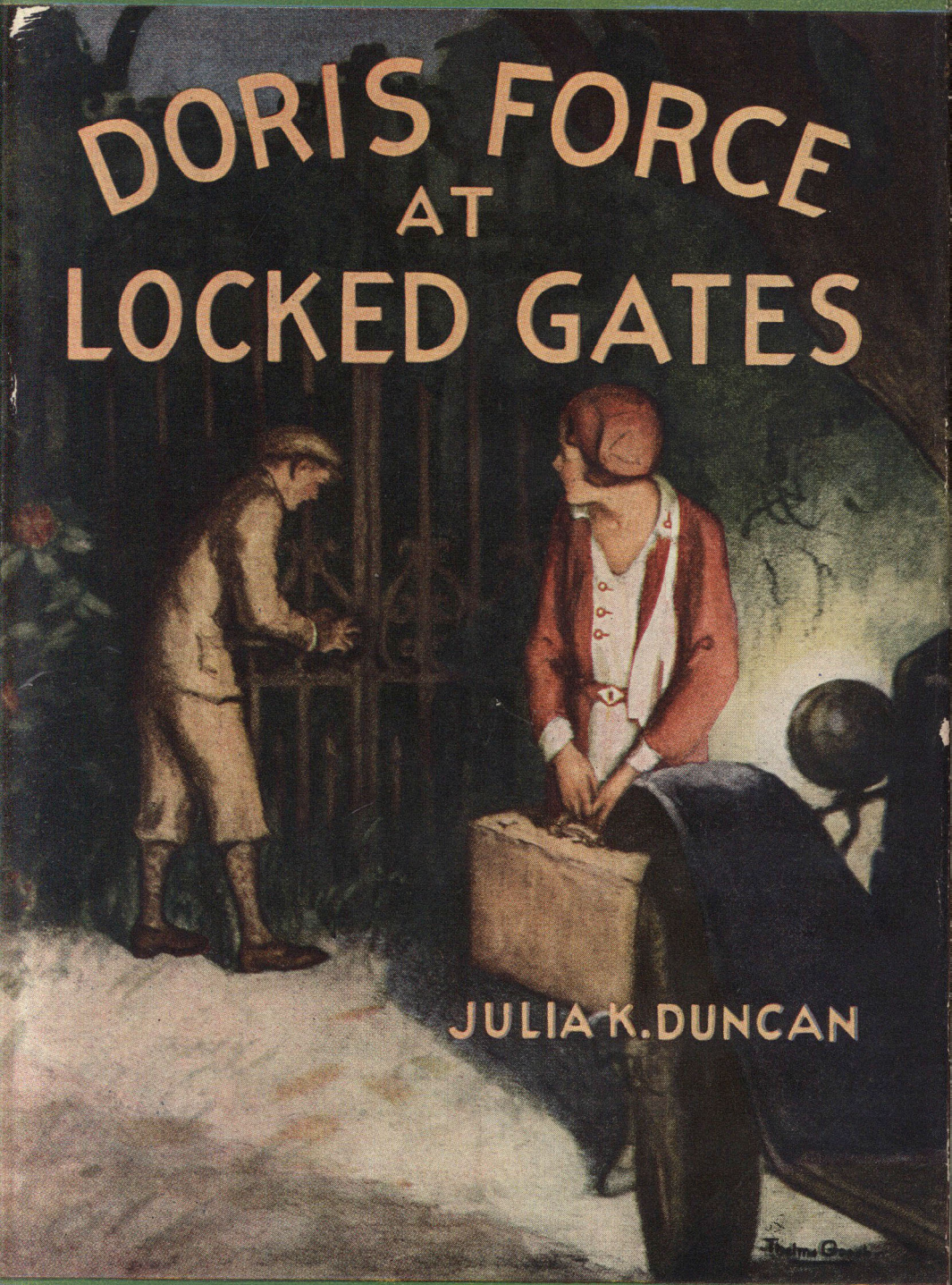
DORIS FORCE AT LOCKED GATES



JULIA K. DUNCAN

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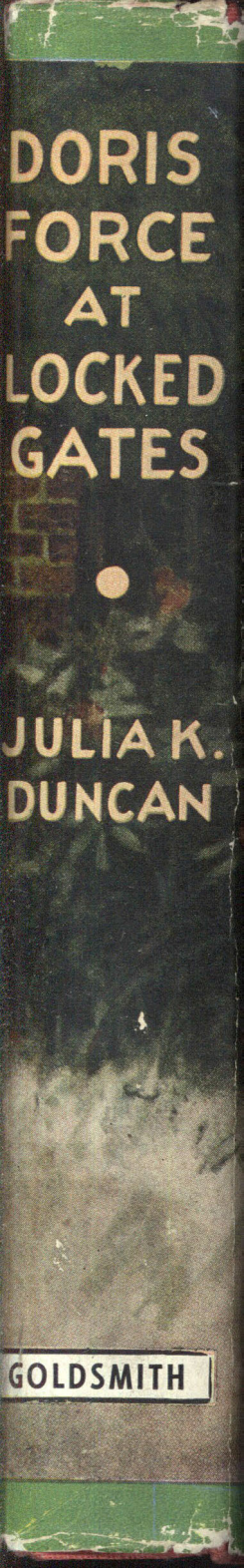
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DORIS FORCE AT LOCKED GATES

Or

Saving a Mysterious Fortune

By

JULIA K. DUNCAN

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CHAPTER I

A QUEER INVITATION

DORIS FORCE AT LOCKED GATES

CHAPTER I

A QUEER INVITATION

"WHAT are you waiting for, Doris? You've been hanging on that gatepost all afternoon."

"Marshmallow" Mallow, a chubby, pleasant-faced youth flung away the core of an apple and came slowly down the walk toward the girl he had just addressed.

"Oh, I'm waiting for the postman," Doris Force, an unusually pretty miss of sixteen, tossed carelessly over her shoulder as she continued to gaze down the street. "He just turned the corner."

"Must be you're expecting a very important letter," Marshmallow drawled. "I'll bet it's from Dave!"

"Oh, go eat another apple!" Doris retorted goodnaturedly. "I'm looking for a letter from Kitty Norris, my chum at boarding school. I'm anxious to find out what she's planning to do this vacation."

"It's sure going to be dull here at Chilton this summer."

"I wish something exciting would turn up."

"So do I, but nothing ever does." Gloomily, Marshmallow thrust his hand into his coat pocket and brought out two candy bars. "Have one, Doris?"

"No, thanks. I don't see how you can enjoy eating all the time! Why, if you keep on, you'll land in the circus!"

Doris knew from past experience that her gibes would be accepted in the bantering spirit in which they were intended. She had known Marshall Mallow for a number of years, and, in fact, they had resided in the same house, for Doris's uncle, Wardell Force, rented a suite of rooms from Marshall's mother, Mrs. Thomas Mallow.

Though Doris and Marshall were as unlike as it was possible for two persons to be, they were the best of friends. Marshmallow, who answered to his given name only when his mother called, was liked by nearly everyone in the neighborhood, but he was subjected to a great deal of teasing because he was decidedly fat. He was a year older than Doris but frequently was mistaken as the younger of the two.

If Marshmallow were easy going and perhaps inclined to be a trifle lazy, Doris made up for his lack of energy. She was studious, and tremendously interested in athletics and music, particularly the latter. It was her ambitious dream that

some day she would win fame as a singer in grand opera. Doris was utterly without vanity and would never admit that she was talented. As for her appearance, she never could understand why her friends were envious of her dark red curly hair and deep blue eyes.

"Here the mailman comes at last," she sighed in relief, as she saw the man turn in at the house next door. "Oh, I do hope he has something for me."

A moment later the postman stopped at the Mallow gate and began to look through a pack of letters.

"Here you are, young lady," he said with a pleasant smile.

"Two!" Doris gasped in delight. "That's better than I had hoped for." Quickly, she scanned the postmarks. "And this one is from Kitty, too!"

Eagerly, she ripped open the envelope. The letter, written in an almost illegible scrawl, was brief, for Kitty Norris had never been a satisfactory correspondent.

"Kitty hasn't made any plans for the summer yet," she informed Marshmallow as she replaced the letter in the envelope. "She thinks it would be fun if we could go to some summer camp."

"Well, why don't you?"

"I wish I could—but there's the problem of money."

"Your uncle will give it to you. He thinks you're just right and he couldn't deny you anything."

"Uncle Ward is a dear and he's always given me everything I want, but I don't like to ask for too much."

"It's your own money, isn't it?"

"Yes, Uncle Ward has looked after my property ever since Mother and Father died, but the other day he told me he wanted to have a long talk with me about money. I guess I've been using it up dreadfully fast. Boarding school costs such a lot."

"Well, it shouldn't cost so much to go camping."

"No, that's so," Doris agreed, more cheerfully. "I think I'll ask him if I can't go. Oh, dear, I don't see why one has to worry about money all the time! I'd just be sick, if I found out I couldn't go on with my music lessons. It would seem so funny to be poor!"

"I wouldn't see anything funny about it," Marshmallow said as he thoughtfully munched a candy bar.

"I didn't really mean it would be funny," Doris corrected. "I've always had the things I've needed and until Uncle Ward spoke to me the other day, it never occurred to me that I didn't have a substantial income."

Remembering that she had not read her second letter, she tore open the envelope and glanced

curiously at the message. It was written in a fine but cramped hand, and Doris turned over at once to the signature.

"Azalea and Iris Gates," she read aloud. "How very odd!"

"What's odd?" Marshmallow demanded.

"Why, just listen to this letter:

'My dear Miss Force: We understand you are the only daughter of the late Louise Trent Force. We knew her a great many years ago, and now after many years of heartache over her older brother, John, we find a most unusual circumstance has arisen. Could you come to Rumson and visit our home in order to acquaint yourself with the present affairs pertaining to John Trent, your uncle? Very truly yours, Azalea and Iris Gates.'"

"You never told me you had an uncle by that name, Doris."

"I didn't know it myself, Marshmallow! This is all news to me!"

"Sort of queer they invite you down to their place at Rumson, isn't it? A fellow would think they could write anything they wanted to tell you."

"Perhaps this is only an excuse for something else," Doris said, thoughtfully scanning the letter a second time. "What do you suppose they mean by saying they want to acquaint me with the present affairs pertaining to my uncle? I hope I'm going to inherit some money! I need it."

"Fat chance," Marshmallow grunted. "More 'n likely they'll ask you for some."

Doris did not reply, for just then a smart red roadster swung around the corner. It did not appear to be running smoothly and the driver, a man of perhaps thirty, dressed immaculately but in rather sporty attire, brought the car to a standstill not a half dozen yards from where Doris and Marshmallow were standing.

"Now what?" they heard him mutter angrily.

Doris and Marshmallow moved over toward the car, curious to learn what was wrong.

"Having trouble?" Marshmallow inquired pleasantly.

"What does it look like?" the stranger snapped crossly. "This car hasn't run decently for the last fifteen miles!"

"Perhaps your gas line is plugged," Marshmallow suggested, lifting the hood. "Yep, that's just what it is. Give me a wire or something and I can fix it in a jiffy."

"Gas line plugged?" the driver grumbled as he searched in the tool case. "That's what I get for buying cheap gas at Rumson."

Doris glanced up quickly.

"What do you know of Rumson?" she asked.

"Plenty."

"Ever hear of people there named Gates?" Marshmallow questioned.

The driver gave him a sharp glance and muttered something which neither Doris nor Marshmallow could make out. To their surprise, he brushed past them and slammed down the hood. Then he sprang into the roadster and without a word of explanation started the motor and drove rapidly away.

CHAPTER II

A FRIENDLY NOTE

"WELL, what do you know about that?" Marshmallow ejaculated, as he watched the red roadster vanish down the street. "I would have fixed his old gas line if he hadn't been in such a rush. The big grouch! I hope it plugs up so badly he can't keep going!"

"I don't see what made him drive off in such a hurry," Doris returned. "We just asked him if he knew any one by the name of Gates and he looked at us so suspiciously—or rather, I should say guardedly. I wish I knew where Rumson was. I'm beginning to get interested."

"Let's look it up on the map," Marshmallow suggested. "There's one in the house."

They hurried up the walk toward the Mallow residence. It was a modern brick English type structure, located on a shady side street of Chilton in the suburbs of Plainfield, and was one of the most attractive houses in the city. The grounds were beautifully landscaped with silver-tipped evergreens, an abundance of rhododendrons and scarlet azaleas. The interior of the house was equally inviting, for Mrs. Mallow was noted as an excellent housekeeper.

Marshmallow found the road map in the desk and brought it out upon the porch. Doris spread it out between them and they poured over it.

"Here it is," Marshmallow declared after a little search. "It can't be more than fifty miles away. You take the Center Ridge road. It's just a small town. You'd have a heck of a summer there."

"It's out in the direction Dave lives," Doris remarked absently.

"Oh, sure, I forgot that!" Marshmallow drawled teasingly. "You'll have a peach of a time."

"And there's an aviation field near Rumson," Doris went on, scarcely noticing what her companion had said.

"That means Dave can fly down to see you every day or so. No wonder girls fall for fellows that are aviators!"

"Dave isn't a full-fledged one yet," Doris returned proudly, "but he'll soon finish his flying course and then he expects to get a license."

"Transport or marriage?" Marshmallow grinned.

"Oh, go chase yourself!" Doris retorted slangily.

Marshmallow got up from the porch and lazily stretched himself.

"I think I will," he returned. "I can smell cookies baking in the kitchen, and I'll just ankle around and coerce Mother into parting with a few dozen."

After Marshmallow had gone inside, Doris con-

tinued to study the map for several minutes and then tossed it aside as she caught sight of her uncle coming up the walk. Eagerly, she ran to meet him.

"What have you in those packages?" she demanded.

"Oh, something nice for you."

As he smiled indulgently down upon her, Doris could not but think how very fortunate she was to have such a generous and handsome uncle. Though Wardell Force was of middle age, with hair fast turning gray, he walked with the step of a boy and his energy was equal to that of any dozen average men. His voice was low pitched, but of singular quality which made one instinctively turn to listen when he spoke.

For many years he had conducted a successful drug store, but had retired from active business to follow his hobby of rescue mission work, welfare and charities. He was naturally a leader of men and in great demand to head committees and speak at important gatherings. Doris was proud of his ability to move large crowds with his magnetic voice. However, she sometimes felt that he was so engrossed in helping others that he neglected himself. Frequently, she had known him to go without a new suit of clothes that he might give the money to some deserving poor family.

"Uncle Ward, you're always buying things for

me," she told him as she accepted the packages. "I don't know why you're so good to me."

They sat down in the porch swing and Doris eagerly began to unwrap the parcels.

"Candy!" she exclaimed in delight. "And novelty jewelry, too. I can't thank you enough!"

"Like the beads?" Uncle Ward asked. "I'm not much of a hand at picking out trinkets for the ladies. Thought they might be a little too conservative for a giddy red-head like you."

"Pooh!" Doris scoffed. "I'm not giddy and you're not conservative."

Her uncle laughed and rumpled her curls.

"Dory," he began, the smile fading, "I'm afraid I shall have to leave you alone for a few days each week."

"Why?"

"I've been named chairman of a committee to raise funds for fresh air camps and the campaign will be carried on all summer. That means I must go out of town frequently. We shall have to plan something nice for you to do during my absence."

"Kitty Norris wants me to go camping with her. May I?"

A shadow passed over Wardell Force's face.

"I have been intending to talk to you about the state of your finances for some time," he said slowly, without answering her question.

Thoughtfully he stroked his hair, avoiding his

niece's eyes. How he hated to inform her that her funds were running low and that a camping trip was therefore inadvisable! Somehow, girls seemed to need a great deal of money.

"Don't look so worried, Uncle Ward," Doris said lightly, observing his preoccupation, and shrewdly guessing the thoughts which were passing through his mind. "I have news for you."

Before she could tell him of the letter she had received from the Misses Gates, there was an unexpected interruption. Jake, the hired man whom Wardell Force had rescued from the slums many years before, came rushing up to the porch.

"There's a plane going over," he told Doris with a grin. "I'll bet two cents it's that boy friend of yours!"

For the first time, Doris became aware of the low hum of an airplane motor, and with her uncle following at a more dignified pace, rushed out into the yard.

"It *is* Dave!" she cried in delight, as she observed a bright red star on either wing of a monoplane which was heading directly toward the Mallow residence.

The plane rapidly approached, swinging so low that the observers on the ground could plainly see the intrepid young flier in the cockpit.

"You don't suppose he can be having engine trouble?" Doris murmured anxiously. "I never

saw him fly at such a low altitude before! Oh, I wish he wouldn't take such risks!"

Her alarm was greater than that of either Jake or her uncle, but then, their interest in David Chamberlin was more impersonal. Doris had known the young aviator for several years and was well aware that his liking for her had steadily grown. However, since she was but sixteen and Dave only a few years older, her uncle refused to consider the affair as a serious one.

Wardell Force had looked after Doris with the interest and kindness of a father, and, as Mrs. Mallow frequently remarked, he had done very well for a bachelor. He had sent her to Barry Manor, a good boarding school, and had given her training by the best vocal teachers in the city. In some ways, Mr. Force had been overindulgent and he found it increasingly difficult to acquaint his niece with the stern fact that the few thousand dollars she had inherited were fast dwindling away.

Doris and her uncle made their home with Mrs. Thomas Mallow, renting a lovely upstairs suite, consisting of two bedrooms, bath and den. Mrs. Mallow, a plump and jolly widow noted for her ability as a cook, gave them their meals and was nearly as fond of Doris as she was of her own son. Doris was likewise a favorite of Jake, the hired man, though his devotion was expressed only by the way his eyes followed her whenever she was

near. Wardell Force had told her little of what he knew concerning the man's past, and since he had come to work at the Mallow residence he had been addressed only by the name of "Jake." Though Doris was much too tactful to question him outright, she often had provided opportunity for him to tell the story of his life, but he had always seemed unwilling to offer any information.

"Oh, I do wish Dave wouldn't try any stunts!" Doris exclaimed as she watched the monoplane slowly circle above the Mallow residence. "Why, he's dropped something!"

As she spoke, she saw a piece of weighted paper fall from the plane. It struck the sidewalk a short distance away and before she could recover from her surprise, Jake had rushed to pick it up.

"Here you are, Miss Doris," he said, handing it to her. "I 'spects it's a love note."

"If it is, it's certainly a new way to get one!" Doris laughed.

Trying not to show her excitement, she quickly scanned the message. It read:

"Will stop in Saturday morning and take you to the big aviation meet in my roadster. Dave."

The monoplane continued to circle at a low altitude and Doris, upon reading the note, promptly waved her handkerchief in token of assent. She watched until the plane had vanished toward the eastern horizon.

"Well, what was the meaning of all that pantomime?" Uncle Ward asked with an amused twinkle.

"Dave's going to stop for me Saturday and take me to the aviation meet in his roadster. I'm thrilled to death! I was hoping he'd ask me, but I was afraid he wouldn't!"

"So? Well, I'm glad he said roadster and not airplane," Wardell Force grunted. "I don't want you to go flying around with any student aviator."

"Dave is nearly through his course now, Uncle Ward, and he's considered the best of all those who are studying at the field."

"That's fine. And now that the excitement is over, we can get back to that discussion we were having. Perhaps we had better step into the den."

Soberly, Doris followed her uncle into the house. She realized that the discussion was to center about money, and hoped that nothing would interfere with her plan to spend the summer with Kitty. Once they were settled in the comfortable den, she showed him the letter she had received from her chum.

"It shouldn't cost very much just to spend a few weeks at a camp," she declared. "I'm sure it isn't a very expensive one."

Wardell Force did not reply immediately, but sat looking at the rug. At last he said:

"I don't like to deny you anything, Doris, but

I'm afraid you don't understand just how matters stand. Your carfare to this camp would cost considerable and of course you would need clothes."

"Just knickers and sport things."

"But they all cost money, Doris—a great deal more than you realize."

"I thought my inheritance would cover everything."

"Your money has been going very fast, my dear," her uncle told her gently. "Your schooling has cost a great deal, and only today I received a letter saying that the tuition was to be doubled. Your music, too, has made deep inroads into your little fortune."

"I had no idea it was as bad as that," Doris said soberly. "I suppose I could give up boarding school and my music lessons—though I'd rather go to work than stop my singing."

"I can't let you give up your school or your music either, Dory. And I frankly admit, I hate to see you go into an office. You are much too young. You should have your good times now."

"But if I haven't any money—"

"You still have some, Dory. I am only telling you this, that you will understand the situation and be as careful of expenses as you can."

"I will," Doris promised, "and I'll start by giving up that camping trip. I suppose, though, I won't get to see Kitty this summer—unless—"

She broke off and her face lighted up.

"I forgot the letter I received from the Misses Gates!" she finished. "Perhaps they offer the solution to all my troubles!"

CHAPTER III

A PROSPECTIVE VISIT

Doris brought out the crumpled letter written by the Misses Gates which she had thrust carelessly into her pocket, and handed it to her uncle. Adjusting his glasses, he read it through and then sat thoughtfully stroking his hair.

"What do you think of it?" Doris demanded.

"Very strange indeed. But just how do you think this letter will help to solve your financial problems?"

"Why, I thought perhaps I am to inherit some money."

Wardell Force folded the letter and returned it to his niece.

"I hope for your sake that you are right, but I would advise you not to build up your hopes."

"Don't you think I should go?"

"I scarcely know what to say, Doris. I recall that years ago your mother had an older brother who for some reason or other left home to travel. He was a young man at that time. To the best of my knowledge he was never heard of again."

"How queer!"

"Yes, as I remember, the members of the family were unwilling to talk of the matter."

"He didn't leave because of some disgrace?"

"Not as far as anyone knew. His leave-taking was shrouded in mystery."

"I never knew I had such an interesting relative!" Doris declared. "The Misses Gates must know more than that about him and I'm curious to learn what they may have to tell me. I wish I could go to Rumson and visit them this summer. May I?"

"You really think you would enjoy it?"

"Perhaps not, but it would be something to do. And then, of course there *is* a possibility that I am to inherit money. If only Kitty were going along, I know I'd have fun."

"But I don't know anything about these women you are invited to visit, Doris."

"Oh, they must be nice," Doris urged. "You can almost tell by their handwriting—it's so refined."

Uncle Ward smiled. When his niece's mind was made up, he seldom could hold out against her.

"Very well," he gave in reluctantly. "I suppose I must say you may go. Mind, I don't feel entirely easy about it."

"Rumson isn't very far away, Uncle Ward, and nothing could happen to me. Besides, Dave lives out that way, and he can sort of keep an eye on me."

"I don't doubt but that he will do that, all right,"

Mr. Force grunted. "I suspect he is your real reason for this trip."

"Honestly, I never thought of that at first."

"All right, run along." He glanced at the clock on the mantel. "Won't you be late for your music lesson?"

Guiltily, Doris snatched up a roll of music she had dropped on the table and dashed into the bedroom for her hat. With a hasty kiss dropped on the top of her uncle's head, she dashed for the door and clattered down the stairs two at a time.

Reaching the street, she ran all the way to the corner and there swung upon the rear end of a street car just as it was starting. Breathlessly, she dropped into the nearest seat and looked at her wrist watch.

"Ten minutes to four," she told herself. "If this old car isn't too poky, I'll make it on time yet."

Doris seldom was late for her vocal lessons, for her interest in music was genuine, and she realized that it was a privilege to be a student of the famed Herr Von Heflinger who accepted only the most promising pupils. On more than one occasion, Doris had become a trifle discouraged, for Von Heflinger was strict and offered criticism more freely than praise.

On this afternoon she reached the studio just as the clock was striking four and so avoided the dis-

pleasure of the master. Always blunt, he offered only a few words of greeting and seated himself at the piano, quickly arranging the music. Striking a few chords, he selected a difficult piece and bade Doris sing.

Somewhat disturbed by Von Heflinger's austere manner, she began a trifle shakily, but before she had sung a dozen notes, she found herself. Soon she had forgotten her accompanist, had forgotten everything save the song. She sang brilliantly and with more feeling than ever before. Von Heflinger caught the spirit and his hands moved quickly over the keyboard, now running arpeggios, now crashing in loud chords or falling so softly that the tones were scarcely audible.

The last note of the song died away, and the master turned to Doris with an expression she had never seen on his face before.

"Ah, Miss Force," he said, "you have the divine spark! You will go far! This summer you must study hard your French and German—and perhaps, who knows, you shall yet be presented in Grand Opera!"

Doris scarcely could believe her own ears, for she knew her teacher was not given to idle praise. Grand Opera! How she longed to become famous! She could almost see herself on the stage, taking her curtain calls, making her bows, accepting the flowers.

She was brought back to reality by hearing her teacher repeat, more sternly:

"This summer you must work—study hard your languages."

The lesson went on, and at five o'clock Doris left the studio, still somewhat dazed at the thought of what might be ahead of her.

"I will work," she told herself as she walked slowly toward the street car. "I'll work night and day!"

Doris had always been one to make the most of her opportunities, and from childhood she had determined upon a career. Her sweet bell-like soprano voice had been inherited from her mother, but only training and diligent practice had developed its full power and volume. Doris's ability and her willingness to help others had made her much in demand as a singer at teas, parties and entertainments.

Many girls would have been satisfied with such popularity, but not Doris Force. From the very start she had set her heart upon reaching the highest rung in the ladder.

"I must study my German and my French this summer," she told herself, "and I really can't do much by myself. I should have a teacher."

This brought a cloud to her face, for she remembered the discussion she had just had with her uncle.

"Money!" she thought impatiently. "I need it so badly, and I don't see where it is coming from unless it turns out that I am to inherit it from my Uncle John Trent."

CHAPTER IV

AN AVIATION MEET

By Saturday, when David Chamberlin called to take Doris to the aviation meet, her financial troubles were temporarily forgotten. She was not given to worrying unnecessarily, and on this day nothing could have interfered with her fun.

As Doris stepped into the trim little roadster, Dave cast her an admiring glance, noting that she was dressed in a white sports costume which set off her red hair to startling advantage. They made an excellent pair. Dave was dark, tall, straight as a cadet, and considered handsome by all of Doris's friends.

"You gave me a dreadful fright when you flew so low over our house," Doris told him as they drove swiftly toward the aviation field, which was located some distance from Chilton.

"Did I? Sorry, but I just had to drop that note." Dave smiled down upon her. "Anyway, you forget that I'm getting to be an expert at handling the joy-stick. I want to take you up one of these days."

"Oh, I'm crazy to fly with you! Perhaps Uncle Ward won't let me, though."

"We can talk him around to it."

As they approached the aviation field, they were forced to proceed at a slow rate, for the highway was jammed with cars.

Entering the gateway, they parked the roadster and then wandered about the field, inspecting the various planes. Dave explained a great deal about the distinguishing characteristics of the various models and introduced her to a number of aviators with whom he was acquainted. As the time approached for the meet to begin, they sought their seats in the improvised grandstand.

Presently the master of ceremonies announced through the loud speakers that the opening event would be an inside loop contest. A hush of expectancy fell over the crowd as two planes zoomed up from the field and immediately began to cut vertical circles in the sky.

"It looks so easy, doesn't it?" Doris murmured.

"Yes, but believe me, it isn't!" Dave assured her, without taking his eyes from the two planes. "If I could only do that!"

"I'm just as glad you can't, Dave. I'd be afraid to have you."

Following the inside loop contest, a squadron of army planes took to the air and thrilled the spectators with a spectacular exhibition of formation flying. Then came parachute jumping, dead-stick landings, and exciting races. Doris found it impossible to restrain her excitement as the planes

rounded the pylons, frequently banking to such an angle that it seemed disaster could not be avoided.

As a climax to the meet the master of ceremonies announced that an intrepid young flier would entertain the crowd with daring stunts. Doris and Dave saw a brilliant red monoplane take off from the field and climb to an altitude of several thousand feet. Then, in quick succession, the red plane went through barrel-rolls, loops, dives, falling leaves, and wing-overs.

"That boy's good!" Dave exclaimed in admiration.

The words were scarcely spoken when Doris gave a startled little cry. It had seemed to her that, as the monoplane came out of a loop, something was wrong. The plane seemed to waver, and then, to Doris's terror, shot down in a tailspin.

"It's all in the stunt," Dave assured her. "The pilot's just—" he broke off and a look of horror came into his own eyes as he saw that the man at the stick was fighting desperately for control.

The spectators, suddenly made aware of the impending disaster, sprang as one man to their feet and cried out in fright. Women and children covered their faces.

The plucky aviator had not given up. Struggling frantically at the controls he refused to take to his parachute and, only a short distance above the field, brought the plane out of the spin. How-

ever, he had scant time to alter the course, and to those on the ground it was apparent that in landing he would overshoot the designated area, which was roped off.

Those who were not in the grandstand scattered in all directions, and timid women screamed in terror. Doris and Dave had instinctively arisen, but no sound escaped them. It appeared almost certain that the plane would hit a group of parked cars near the fence.

Just at the critical moment, however, the pilot managed to turn the monoplane enough to miss the row of cars. As a wild cheer of admiration and relief arose from the spectators, he brought the craft to rest without mishap.

Instantly, a crowd of people swarmed about the plane. The pilot tried to keep them back, but it appeared almost certain that before policemen could reach the scene, someone would be pushed into the whirling propeller.

Doris and Dave were seated not far from where the mishap had occurred, and now, with the intention of trying to help, they rushed toward the plane. Before they could reach the spot, the pilot had switched off the engine. The crowd continued to press about the plane, careless of the damage they might do to wings or struts.

"Get back!" Dave shouted, helping the policemen and some mechanics to control the throng.

Nearly everyone goodnaturedly backed away from the monoplane, but one man refused to budge.

"That plane nearly struck my car!" he shouted angrily. "Let me get at that pilot! I'll show him a thing or two!"

Startled, Doris turned to look at the man and was astonished to see that it was the driver who had been stalled in front of the Mallow residence only a few days before.

"Say, who does that fellow think he is, anyway?" Dave murmured impatiently. "His old car wasn't touched! If that pilot hadn't done some quick thinking, someone would have been killed sure!"

They watched as a policeman remonstrated with him, and were disgusted at his sullen remarks. After he had vented his spite sufficiently, he sprang into his roadster and backed out of the parking place so rapidly that women and children were forced to scurry to escape the wheels.

"He didn't care much whether he struck anyone or not!" Doris declared. "That man is positively vicious."

After the excitement had died down, she and Dave went to their own roadster. There was a bad traffic jam and it was some time before they reached the gate.

"It certainly was a thrilling day," Doris told her friend when they were on the highway. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

"Glad you liked it," Dave returned. "Next year I hope to take part myself."

"The best part of it was that no one was injured," Doris continued. "It would have ruined the entire meet if there had been a serious accident there at the last."

They drove along in silence for some time, but as they approached the Mallow residence, she broached the subject which had been troubling her.

"Dave, you've frequently been to Rumson, haven't you?" she began indirectly.

"Sure, why?"

"I've been invited to visit there this summer. Do you think I'd like it?"

"Well, it's a pretty decent town for its size. Whom are you visiting?"

"Two sisters by the name of Gates. Azalea and Iris Gates. Did you ever hear of them?"

"Gates? Let me think. Oh, sure, I remember their place. It's right at the edge of town."

"What kind of a house have they?"

"Oh, it's as big as a barn. Old and rambling. It seems to be a sort of mysterious place."

"Mysterious?"

"I don't know anything about it myself, except that I've heard folks say there is something queer about it. The neighbors call it 'Locked Gates.'"

"Why that name?"

"I suppose it's because the double front gates are always kept locked. A fence surrounds the garden, and vines grow so thick on it you can't get a glimpse inside. Take my advice, Doris, and don't go there for a visit. It would give you the creeps!"

CHAPTER V

KITTY ARRIVES

CHAPTER V

KITTY ARRIVES

WHAT Dave had told her about the old Gates place in Rumson did not discourage Doris. If anything, it made her more eager to spend a few weeks at Locked Gates, for the thought of mystery was indeed very intriguing.

Unfortunately for her plans, she chanced to repeat to her uncle what Dave had said, and that worthy at once began to regard the proposed visit with misgiving.

"I'm not sure I should let you go," he told her doubtfully. "There's something funny about this whole affair. Don't you think you had better give up the trip?"

"Uncle Ward, you said I could go," Doris moaned. "Don't change your mind now. There probably isn't anything mysterious about the place anyway—Dave was just talking."

"I think I shall do a little investigating of my own," her uncle returned gravely.

He had already learned through a former business associate that the Misses Gates were well thought of in Rumson, but that of late years they had kept close to their own premises. Recalling that Jake had at one time worked in Rumson,

Wardell Force sauntered out into the garden where he was weeding the flowers.

"Well, Jake," he began, "how are your posies doing?"

The hired man straightened and regarded Mr. Force with a delighted smile.

"First rate, sir," he answered. "First rate! Miss Doris's roses goin' to be in bloom inside of another week."

Jake's hobby was gardening, and he was never more satisfied than when at work with the flowers. The sun and wind had tanned his wrinkled face but it had brought a glow of health which had not been there when Wardell Force had first brought him to Chilton. At that time Jake had been broken in body and in spirit, but fresh air, good food and kindness had made a new man of him. His hair, which was streaked with gray, seldom was combed, and his garments usually bore the stamp of his work. He walked with a noticeable stoop.

Jake was a rather silent man and seldom spoke unless addressed. He kept to himself and when not working about the grounds usually stayed alone in his room. Seemingly, he lived only for the present, as he never mentioned the past and took the future for granted. Of his devotion to Wardell Force and Doris, there was not the slightest question.

"Jake, you used to work in Rumson before you came here, didn't you?" Mr. Force questioned.

"Yes, sir." Jake avoided the other's eyes. Any reference to his past usually caused him to withdraw into his shell, but with Wardell Force he was more free.

"Do you remember a Gates house there, Jake?"

"Yes, sir, I remember the place well. A gloomy house it was, sir. Many a night I had to pass it after dark, and it sort of gave me the creeps."

"I didn't think anything could give you the creeps," Mr. Force said with an understanding smile.

"Neither did I, sir, but that house—you never saw a soul enter or leave. Folks said the gates had rusted shut. But why are you askin', Mr. Force?"

"Doris was thinking of going there for a short visit."

Jake shook his head as he picked up the rake.

"I'm not aimin' to advise you, sir, but if 'twere me, I'd not let her go there alone."

"I think perhaps you are right, Jake," Wardell Force returned thoughtfully as he turned away. "I'll have another talk with Doris and see if I can't get her out of the notion of going."

Returning to the house, he found his niece in the den studying German. She put aside her book at once as he came over to her, but her face clouded at mention of the visit.

"I'll give it up if you're so worried, but I don't see any reason for not going. The Misses Gates

are probably just two dear old ladies who like privacy, and the neighbors are inclined to gossip."

"I see you have set your heart upon going," Mr. Force sighed.

"Then you will let me go?"

"Upon one condition."

"And what is that?"

"That you get some one to go with you."

"I know just the person, Uncle Ward. Kitty Norris will be crazy to go!"

"You're both crazy to go," Mr. Force returned with a different inflection.

Doris, highly pleased at her latest idea, sprang up and rushed to the desk. It took her only a few minutes to compose a letter to her chum, and having finished it, she rushed off to the corner mail box, fearful lest her uncle change his mind again.

The next three days she waited in a tremor of excitement for a response. On the fourth day the postman brought the letter from Kitty. It was brief but very much to the point.

"Dear Dory:" it read. "Will I come? I'll jump at the chance! Here's to a high old time at Locked Gates, and may we discover when they were locked and why! Meet me Wednesday on the 4:40 train. Yours, Kitty."

It was already Monday and that left only two days before Kitty's arrival. Doris flew about putting the suite in order and spent a great deal

of time getting her clothes ready to pack. The problem was made somewhat difficult due to the fact that she did not know what sort of reception awaited her.

"I don't know whether they'll give any parties or not," she told herself, "but my guess is they won't. I'll take a chance on it and leave my evening gown at home."

Late Wednesday afternoon, Doris and her uncle drove to the station to meet Kitty. She was nearly the last one off the train and Doris was beginning to think she had not come, when she caught sight of her in the crowd.

The girls exchanged enthusiastic hugs and fell to jabbering as excitedly as two magpies, or at least so it seemed to Uncle Ward, who was quite ignored until Doris recalled that she had failed to introduce him.

"I feel as though I know you already," he told Kitty with his genial smile. "Doris has talked about you almost continually."

He placed her suitcase in the back of the coupé, and the girls squeezed in beside him on the front seat. As they drove toward home, Doris told her chum more about Locked Gates and the reason why she had planned the trip.

Though not as pretty as Doris, Kitty had a charming personality and was one of the most popular girls at Barry Manor. She was very

talkative and always ready for a good time. If she excelled in basketball and tennis rather than in French and English, it was not because of lack of ability, but rather because she could never find the time to study. At Barry Manor her room had always been the gathering place for friends and the scene of many tea parties.

"I'm so excited about this place we're going to," she told Doris. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow, if that isn't rushing you off too soon. Uncle Ward is going out of town to raise money for some charity—"

"A little hot air for a fresh air fund," Mr. Force interposed. "A speech at the Rotary Club, one at the church, and one at the Chamber of Commerce. That's the opening day's program and it will be about the same for the next month."

"Unless we leave for Locked Gates tomorrow, we'll be left here by ourselves," Doris explained.

"Let's go, by all means."

"I thought you would want to start right away. Dave said he would take us down in his roadster."

"We'll have a wonderful time, too!" Kitty declared enthusiastically.

Doris nodded in agreement. In spite of what Dave and Jake had said concerning Locked Gates, she little dreamed of the adventure that lay before her.

"I just hope we have a real interesting session at

this place," continued Kitty gleefully, "something to tell the sorority about when we return to school in the fall. Just fancy the crowd gathered around us while we tell in a solemn voice the mysteries of Locked Gates. I really hope something exciting does happen to us, Dory," she exulted, as the roadster swung around the corner, throwing her little hat a bit more rakishly over one eye. "I'll be disappointed if it doesn't."

"Kitty, you are very brave just at present. Be sure to keep up your present demeanor as we go forth on our big adventure," admonished Doris Force thoughtfully.

CHAPTER VI

LOCKED GATES

KITTY NORRIS had always been popular at school, for she had a charming way of fitting into things. Before she had been in Chilton an hour she felt perfectly acquainted with Wardell Force, Mrs. Mallow, Marshmallow and even Jake. Marshmallow in particular took an immediate liking to her and tried to monopolize her time.

"You know," Kitty admitted that night, after the girls had gone to their room, "I sort of like Marshall. He's so jolly."

"I thought you were quite taken by him," Doris laughed. "It's plain to see Marshmallow has taken a distinct liking to you."

"Doris Force!"

"Well, he has. Too bad he's so fat."

"He is a little stout," Kitty admitted.

"Stout!" Doris teased. "How you have fallen!"

"Well, then I guess we're even," Kitty retorted. "You and Dave—"

"We'd better be tumbling into bed," Doris interposed hastily, "or we won't be rested for our trip tomorrow to Locked Gates."

Shortly after eleven o'clock the following morning, David Chamberlin called for the girls. Ward-

ell Force had of necessity taken an early train out of the city, so there were only Jake, Marshmallow and his mother to see them off.

"Wish I were going," the plump youth murmured enviously. "Still, I have a sneaking notion it won't be as jolly as you think down there at Locked Gates."

"Then we'll liven the place up," Doris declared lightly.

Dave drove rather slowly, for neither he nor the girls were eager to reach Rumson before the middle of the afternoon. Doris and Kitty had gone to great pains to prepare and pack a dainty lunch and the three planned to stop some place along the road for a picnic.

The day was unpleasantly warm and sultry. As they took the main highway leading to Rumson, Doris glanced anxiously at the scattered clouds which were to be seen overhead.

"I hope it doesn't rain and spoil our picnic," she said.

"Oh, I don't think it will," Dave replied. "The sky is almost clear."

It was true that the sun was shining brightly, but the sky had a dull appearance which Doris did not like. However, as they motored along enjoying the scenery, she forgot the matter completely.

"I'm beginning to get hungry," Dave announced

as it approached noon. "We may as well begin to look for a good place to stop."

Presently, Doris caught sight of an attractive grove of trees ahead.

"That's just the spot!" she declared. "Cool and shady and not too close to the road."

Dave parked the roadster just off the highway and they took the hamper over to the grove.

"This is a dandy place," Kitty approved. "I believe there's a spring back there among the rocks."

Dave had been gazing thoughtfully toward a sign.

"I'm not sure that we should have stopped here," he said.

"Why not?" Doris demanded quickly.

"We seem to have camped pretty close to the entrance to the Glenville Roadhouse. However, we're not on their property."

"What difference does it make?" Kitty asked innocently.

"Well—" Dave hesitated. "This roadhouse doesn't have much of a reputation, so I've been told."

"Perhaps we had better leave," Doris suggested.

"We have everything all spread out," Kitty complained, "and this is the nicest grove we've passed. We're not even within sight of the roadhouse."

"I don't believe it will do any harm to stay here," Dave agreed. "We'll soon be on our way again."

They sat down and began to eat luncheon. There were thin sandwiches, ice-cold lemonade, salad, pickles, and some of Mrs. Mallow's delicious cookies and cake. Long before they had finished, they realized that their imaginations had been more ambitious than their appetites.

"I can't eat another thing," Kitty groaned.

"It's a shame to let these sandwiches go to waste," Dave excused himself, selecting one made of chicken.

"Bet you can't take it all in one bite," Doris dared him on.

"A little thing like that? Just watch me! Why you're not looking!"

It was true that Doris was no longer interested. A red roadster had turned into the lane leading to the roadhouse, and she had caught a glimpse of the driver's face.

"It's that same man we saw at the aviation meet!" she exclaimed. "Evidently, he intends to have luncheon at the roadhouse."

"Must not care much for his reputation," Dave returned.

"You know, I don't like this place," Doris said quietly. "Now that we've finished eating, let's be on our way."

"Right-o!" Dave sprang up and began to pack the dishes into the hamper.

As he placed the basket into the rear of the

roadster he surveyed the sky and frowned slightly.

"It's beginning to look more like rain than it did," he admitted. "I'm afraid we'd better make full steam ahead or we may get caught in a storm."

Kitty and Doris did not hear, for their attention had been attracted to a little brown dog which stood in the roadway regarding them with wistful, friendly eyes.

"Oh, isn't he cute!" Doris exclaimed. "Here, doggie! Come here!"

The little animal first backed timidly away and then, as the girls continued to coax, hesitated, and finally came a few steps toward them, wagging his tail in a friendly way. As Doris stooped to pat him on the head he gave a pleased bark, and raising up on his hind legs, eagerly offered her his right paw.

"He knows tricks," Doris declared. "Oh, I wonder who owns him?"

"Looks to me like a stray dog," Dave told her. "He hasn't any collar or license. The dog catcher will likely get him before long."

"Not if I can help it!" Doris declared. "If he doesn't belong to anyone, we can take him with us."

"What will the Misses Gates say when you come dragging him in?" Dave asked with a smile.

"Oh, they won't care. He's such a darling!"

"What shall we name him?" Kitty questioned.

"Let's call him Wags," Doris exclaimed impulsively. "The name seems appropriate."

Wags had no objection to entering the car and snuggled down comfortably between the two girls. With an anxious glance at the sky, Dave started the engine.

"Looks like a big storm is rolling up," he said.

The girls had been so interested in Wags that they had paid scant attention to the clouds, but now as Doris looked about, she was alarmed. The air was oppressive and not a breath of wind was stirring. Heavy black clouds had loomed up in the west and rapidly were spreading over the entire sky.

"I think I can get you to Locked Gates before it strikes us," Dave said grimly, as he shifted gears and stepped heavily on the gas pedal. "Hold tight!"

The roadster fairly shot down the road. As the figures crept upwards on the tape of the speedometer, Doris and Kitty clung to each other. Not until the car began to rock and weave on the road, did Dave reduce his speed and then only slightly. However, he held the roadster steady and handled the wheel with such a sure hand, that the girls had confidence in his driving.

It was the appearance of the sky which frightened them. The sun had been entirely blotted

from sight, and though it was mid-afternoon, it seemed nearly as dark as night. Dave snapped on the headlights.

"I'll get you to Locked Gates before the storm breaks," he announced in relief as they rounded a sharp curve and came within sight of Rumson. "Fortunately, the place is right at the edge of town."

A few minutes later, he brought the car to a groaning halt in front of the old Gates estate. In the gathering darkness the girls caught but a glimpse of the large, rambling house which was set back some distance from the road, but that was sufficient to assure them that it was gloomy and forbidding.

"Here you are," Dave said briskly. "Nice place for a murder!"

"Ugh!" Doris murmured. "You make my hair stand on end!"

"I almost wish we hadn't come," Kitty said nervously.

"Oh, everything's all right. I was only joking." Dave sprang from the car and went over to try the double gates which barred the entrance. "Just as I thought! Locked!"

"Then how are we to get in?" Doris questioned.

"There's an entrance at the rear. Guess these gates are always kept locked. We'll try the other gate."

Driving the roadster down a side street, he found the back entrance and helped the girls to alight. As he picked up their suitcases to take them to the door, Doris glanced again at the storm clouds. A streak of lightning flashed across the sky, and she knew that unless Dave started back at once, he would be caught in the rain.

"Don't bother to take us to the door," she commanded. "Start for Chilton this minute!"

"I don't like to leave you here until I know everything is O. K.," he protested.

"It's only a step to the door, Dave. Be a good boy and don't wait."

"Well, since you insist, I will start, because it looks like a storm and the roads may get slippery."

Hastily the three said goodbye and Dave sprang into the roadster. He slammed the door shut and was gone before the girls had managed to unfasten the gate.

"It does look spooky," Kitty quavered.

Doris laughed uncertainly. She managed to open the gate and it swung back on creaking hinges. A sudden breath of wind struck her face and went whistling through the trees.

The house, half-hidden by shrubbery, was shrouded in deepest gloom, and no light glimmered from the windows. Doris hesitated as she picked up her suitcase. Kitty held back, and even Wags seemed reluctant to venture down the path.

"Come on, Kitty," Doris admonished, "Everything is all right."

As she spoke, a gust of wind whined through the trees, and to the girls it sounded strangely like the wailing of a human being in distress.

"Oh, I don't like it here," Kitty murmured timidly. "I'm afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Kit. Just follow me."

Carrying their heavy suitcases, the girls groped their way down the path. It was so dark now that they could not see where they were going and frequently brushed against shrubbery. Wags had disappeared.

Suddenly, Kitty gave a frightened cry as she stumbled over the root of a tree. Catching Doris's arm to save herself from a bad fall, she permitted her pocketbook to slip from her hand. It opened as it struck the ground, and the contents spilled in every direction.

"Look what I've done now!" Kitty wailed.

Doris set her suitcase down and helped her chum search for the things she had lost. They found a pencil, a compact and a number of bills, when another flash of lightning momentarily illumined the path.

"Never mind the rest," Kitty said nervously. "I've found everything except a quarter, and I'll look for that tomorrow."

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE RECEPTION

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A STRANGE RECEPTION

FRANTICALLY, Doris and Kitty called to Wags and in response to their commands he reluctantly returned to them. The man who had fallen scrambled to his feet, and stood glaring angrily at the girls.

"Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry," Doris apologized. "Wags isn't really vicious. He was just playing."

"Playing!" the man snapped. "You call that playing!" As Wags again came toward him he raised his foot to kick him.

"Don't!" Doris pleaded. "I tell you it was an accident."

She caught the dog up in her arms and held him away.

"What do you want here anyway?" the man asked rudely.

The first drops of rain were beginning to fall and as a vivid streak of lightning flashed above the house, the girls cringed.

"Please, may we come in?" Doris begged.

Silently the man held the door open for them but he scowled as they passed through. They entered a large kitchen. Before they had time to

take stock of it, a stout, slovenly woman who was mopping the floor, bore wrathfully down upon them.

"You can't come in here with that dog!" she told them. "Can't you see I've just finished mopping up this big ark of a kitchen?"

Chilled by this reception, the girls hastily backed toward the door.

"What is it you want?" the woman asked, less harshly.

"We came to see the Misses Gates," Doris explained. "They're expecting us."

"Oh!" A peculiar expression flashed over the woman's face. She was silent for an instant and then she said: "You came to the wrong door. This is our quarter."

"And you are—"

"Cora Sully. I take care of the house. This is my husband, Henry, and I'll tell you right now there ain't a lazier man alive!"

Somewhat embarrassed at such brutal frankness, Doris and Kitty continued to edge toward the door.

"Go around to the side door and I'll let you in proper, else the old maids'll be put out." Then she added more gently: "We're not much used to company here."

As the girls were about to close the door behind them, she called shrilly:

"You can't take the dog in!"

Still carrying their suitcases, and with Wags trotting at their heels, Doris and Kitty made their way toward the side door. It was beginning to rain hard.

"What a horrible woman!" Kitty shuddered. "Now, what can we do with Wags?"

"We can't let him run wild in the storm, that's certain. I have an idea!"

They had reached the shelter of the side veranda and Doris set her suitcase down and began to unfasten the strap.

"What are you doing?" Kitty demanded.

"I'm going to tie Wags under the porch. He'll be out of the rain there."

"It's mean of that woman not to let us take him in," Kitty said.

She helped her chum fix the dog, but they were forced to drag him under the porch by main force, for he was reluctant to leave them. By the time they had fastened him securely in his shelter, they were thoroughly drenched themselves.

"What sights we are!" Doris declared. "I wonder if that woman ever will let us in?"

"Here she comes now," Kitty said in a low tone.

The door swung open and Cora, wearing a clean white apron which she had donned for the occasion, ushered them into a long hall.

"Right this way," she directed.

They followed her into a spacious living room,

bright and cheerful, but furnished in rather prim and old-fashioned style. A fire was burning in the grate.

"Two young ladies to see you," Cora announced.

The Misses Gates promptly arose and, putting aside their sewing, eagerly came forward to greet the girls. Cora took their suitcases and wraps and left them.

"I am so glad you came," one of the ladies said in a soft, sweet voice. "When this storm gathered so quickly, we were afraid you might be caught in it." She smiled apologetically. "Our home isn't as modern as it once was, but Azalea and I will try to make you comfortable here."

As she sank back into the restful depths of a big chair, Doris had an opportunity to study the two sisters.

Iris and Azalea quite obviously were twins, for they looked alike and they dressed identically. Their voices, too, were similar—low, musical and soft. They looked rather frail and delicate, Doris thought, and their faces were finely chiseled like that of a cameo. They wore simple, long, white cotton dresses. Had it not been for their snow white hair, Doris would not have guessed that they had long since left their youth behind.

If the girls had been disappointed at their first reception, they no longer had any doubt of their welcome. Azalea and Iris set them at ease by

maintaining a pleasant, light conversation. It was apparent to Doris that they were both well educated, though they seemed to take little interest in modern-day topics.

"I don't believe they know much about what has been going on in the world for the last ten years," Doris told herself.

Before fifteen minutes had elapsed, she found herself quite captivated by the two ladies, and Kitty, too, had forgotten her former uneasiness.

As the afternoon advanced, the girls found themselves more and more comfortable, looking forward to a pleasant visit.

"No doubt you wondered why we invited you here," Iris said after a time, addressing Doris.

"Well, yes, I did," she admitted.

"It's a long story. Azalea and I—"

Her voice trailed off as Cora Sully appeared in the doorway.

"Supper is served," she announced.

Iris arose to lead the way to the dining room.

"The story must wait," she said with a smile. "I know you girls are far more interested in food just now."

"I am a bit hungry," acknowledged Doris with a pleasant smile, as she and Kitty followed the twins into the next room where Cora was putting the finishing touches to the table.

Kitty kept close to her chum. Doris caught her

eye. In a whisper she heard Kitty ask her about the dog outside, as she motioned toward the food—Kitty wanted Wags to be remembered.

"Wait!" signalled Doris, as the group took seats about the table.

But would the dog wait?

CHAPTER VIII

A VISITOR

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A VISITOR

SUPPER at the mansion was always a rather stiff and formal affair, but on this evening the tension was somewhat relaxed. The Misses Gates chatted pleasantly with the girls, making them feel entirely at their ease.

The table had been laid with an elaborately embroidered tablecloth, of good quality but slightly yellowed with age. The dishes, the cut glass, and the silver were of the best. Two tall candles in pewter holders lighted the room. Cora Sully, fairly presentable in white cap and apron, brought the food in from the kitchen, but she served it in an indifferent fashion.

"Cora really is an excellent cook," Iris said half apologetically, when the woman had returned to the kitchen.

"Yes, indeed," Doris agreed quickly.

She had no fault to find with the supper, for the creamed chicken was delicious, the biscuits light, the salad crisp and fresh. It was only that she had taken a dislike to Cora and wondered why the Misses Gates kept such a slouchy, sullen woman.

"Mrs. Sully has been with us for some time,"

Iris continued. "She was the daughter of our former dressmaker, but she married a man that was no good. Undoubtedly he means well but he is shiftless, and finds it hard to obtain work. We took them both in."

"I see," Doris murmured.

She scarcely knew what to reply, and Kitty was leaving the burden of the conversation to her.

Mrs. Sully cleared away the dishes and appeared with the dessert, a steaming rich pudding which she placed before Azalea, who served it upon individual plates.

"Iris and I seldom indulge ourselves when we are here alone," Azalea remarked, "but we remember how young girls like sweets."

"I'm afraid you have gone to a great deal of trouble on our account," Doris said.

"Not at all," Azalea assured her. "It is a pleasure to have you here. We have so few visitors."

It seemed to Doris, who chanced to be watching Mrs. Sully, that an irritated expression passed over her face.

"*She* doesn't like it because we are here," Doris thought. "Probably thinks we'll make her more work!"

She picked up her dessert spoon, but before she could start eating her pudding, there came an unexpected interruption. A loud barking and growling grated upon the ears of the diners.

Doris and Kitty exchanged guilty glances. It was Wags!

"Gracious!" Iris murmured. "What can be the matter?"

Embarrassed, Kitty looked down at her plate.

"I'm so sorry," Doris apologized, "but I'm afraid it must be Wags."

"Wags?" Azalea asked, a glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

Doris nodded unhappily.

"He's the cutest little brown dog you ever saw—I know you'll just love him! Kitty and I picked him up on the road this afternoon and brought him along. We didn't want to leave him out in the storm, so we tied him up under the porch. I don't know what set him off like that."

Before either of the women could reply, Wags again let out a series of savage yelps and Doris heard the sound of a man's voice. Hastily, she pushed back her chair.

"I'll see what is the matter," she said, excusing herself.

Hurrying to the door, she opened it and stared straight into the face of the man who had made such a disturbance at the aviation meet! Wags, still securely tied under the porch, had taken exception to the appearance of the stranger and continued to bark excitedly.

"Be quiet, Wags!" Doris commanded.

"So that's your mut, eh?" the stranger asked unpleasantly. "Vicious dogs shouldn't be at large!"

Doris stifled a sharp retort. Now that she saw the man at close range she was more unfavorably impressed than before. He was dressed in a new suit of loud pattern, and carried a cane. His face was hard and cold and his eyes had an unpleasant way of boring into one.

Before Doris could recover from her surprise, the Misses Gates came rushing into the hall.

"I thought I recognized your voice," Iris murmured, self-consciously.

"We were wondering if you would come tonight," Azalea added, a tell-tale blush creeping over her pale cheeks.

The stranger bestowed upon each a smile which to Doris seemed to fairly drip sentiment.

"Did you think I could stay away from two such charming young ladies?" he asked in a strangely softened voice.

Kitty, who had followed the Misses Gates into the hall, looked at her chum in disgust. Azalea and Iris saw nothing amiss. One of them took his hat and stick, the other his dripping coat.

Miss Azalea gazed admiringly at the cane which he bestowed upon her with all the grace of a sleight-of-hand performer.

"How's that?" he asked in self-satisfied tones as

he twirled the stick jauntily before handing it to the enraptured hostess.

"Oh, aren't you clever, Ronald?"

"Well," he shrugged his shoulders as if to appear very modest, "they do say I'm a good entertainer."

Iris shook the raindrops from his topcoat solicitously and hung it up to dry on the antique coat rack in the corner.

"You know, I brought that cane over with me from Monte Carlo. That was my lucky day. My side of the argument was right, as usual, so the cane fell to my lot. I told the chap at the Casino how the play of a friend of mine would come out, and of course it came out as I said it would. You understand, ladies, that it was just a friendly little bet, nothing to disturb one's conscience," hoping that these last words of his would vindicate any doubts in their minds as to his moral standing. "A friendly little wager," he concluded, as with a wave of his hand he dismissed the subject entirely.

For a minute or two they were so excited and flustered that they entirely forgot the presence of the two girls. Recovering herself, Azalea turned to introduce them.

"Doris," she said, beaming happily, "I am sure this will be a pleasant surprise for you. May I present Ronald Trent, the son of your long-lost uncle?"

"Pleased to meet 'chu,'" the stranger mumbled.

Doris managed a perfunctory reply, but she really was too stunned to consider what she was saying. She could not believe that she had heard correctly, and after Kitty had acknowledged the introduction, she turned to Azalea.

"Did I understand you to say Mr. Trent is a relative of mine?"

"Sure, your cousin," the man broke in, before Azalea could answer. "Don't worry, kid. You and me will hit it off together."

Doris could not trust herself to reply. She glanced toward Kitty and saw the puzzled look in her eyes. What must her chum think!

"That man my cousin!" she thought dismally. "Oh, dear, I wish I hadn't found it out."

"Well, we had a heavy shower, girlies," boomed the new arrival as he adjusted his glaring tie carefully, "but I found a chummy roadhouse with a big welcome during the heaviest thunder. I certainly enjoy good company." He smacked his lips thoughtfully.

Kitty carefully kept her eyes turned away from her embarrassed chum. This was an unexpected turn to events. She was more surprised and worried at meeting this flashy stranger than she cared to have the group know. Reared in a refined and cultured environment, she feared her family might call her away at once, if they should become aware

of the fact that such a man as this one were to spend any time in the company of the girls. She pictured the faculty at Barry Manor as being highly shocked and amazed should anybody tell them that these two pupils were spending their vacation in a place where they were obliged to associate with a person of the type of Ronald Trent. Would she have to desert her friend and leave for home on account of the sudden appearance of this relative of Doris?

Kitty pondered this matter seriously in her mind. Doris was equally worried in her own way.

CHAPTER IX

A CONVERSATION OVERHEARD

THE Misses Gates escorted Ronald Trent to the living room, forgetting in their excitement that supper had not been finished. Doris and Kitty were too polite to mention that they had not had their dessert.

"You girlies get prettier every day," the man gushed, playfully straightening Iris's lace collar and slyly giving Azalea's hand a squeeze.

Iris giggled, and her sister cast down her eyes in confusion. Ronald Trent winked at Doris and Kitty as much as to say: "How easy they fall!"

Iris and Azalea, unaware that they were appearing in a slightly ridiculous light, continued to beam and to blush, listening intently to every word Ronald Trent said, and laughing at everything which might be remotely interpreted as a joke. Doris was completely disgusted at the way the man was acting, and when he tried to cajole her into a more friendly attitude, she could not hide her indifference. Azalea and Iris did not notice how quiet she was, but Ronald Trent was aware of her attitude and frowned slightly.

"What's the matter, girlie?" he teased.

"Nothing," Doris returned quietly.

She felt that if he continued to plague her she surely would disgrace herself by saying something which would offend the Gates sisters. How could they like such a man? He was cheap and coarse and obviously insincere.

"Poor things," she told herself. "They haven't had much attention from men and it flatters them."

The tension was somewhat relieved when Iris asked Kitty if she could sing or play the piano.

"I'm not in the least musical," Kitty returned, "but Doris sings beautifully."

Upon being urged to entertain the group, Doris obediently went to the piano. After looking over the music she selected a familiar piece, struck a few chords, and began to sing. A hush fell over the group, and even Ronald Trent, who was talking to Iris, became quiet.

"Lovely," Azalea murmured when she had finished. "You have a wonderful voice."

"Pretty keen," Ronald Trent agreed, "but can't you sing something livelier? I don't like them church hymns."

"You call those songs church hymns?" Doris asked with an amused smile. "Really, if you want popular music, I can't oblige you. My teacher permits me to sing only classical."

After she had left the piano, Ronald Trent launched into a lengthy tale concerning his recent

exploits in South America. In many particulars the story did not hang together, and Doris and Kitty were bored. Iris and Azalea were flattering listeners and, whenever he showed signs of pausing, urged him on with interested questions.

As Doris listened, doubts began to form in her mind. It seemed incomprehensible that this boasting, crude stranger could really be her cousin. There must be a mistake, she told herself. Ronald Trent was *not* a relative; of that she felt certain.

"Well, girlies, isn't it about time you trundled off to your little beds?" he asked, looking insinuatingly at Doris and Kitty.

"I imagine you girls are tired," Azalea murmured. "If you like, I can have Cora show you to your room."

"Oh, we're not sleepy yet," Kitty said mischievously.

Ronald Trent fairly glared at her.

"Run along now," he said lightly, but with a look which warned the girls he expected to be obeyed. "I have some business to talk over with Iris and Azalea."

Iris rang for Cora, and the girls reluctantly followed her upstairs through a long hall and down a number of steps into a wing which branched off to the right. Cora showed them their room and left them alone.

"Looks as if we're to be off in this wing all by

ourselves," Kitty said uneasily. "This place is too spooky to suit me."

The room was large and austere with long mirrors and an old-fashioned four-poster bed and dresser. Several rag rugs were scattered over the bare floor. Double windows looked down over the side veranda and the branches of a sprawling maple tree brushed against the panes.

As a precautionary measure Kitty looked under the bed and peeped into the closet.

"Wasn't that man terrible?" Doris said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "And the way he sent us to bed just as though we were infants! Do you think he really could be a cousin of mine?"

"I don't see how he could be," Kitty comforted. "He doesn't look or act like any of your relatives that I ever saw."

"Well, I hope not! Wonder what he wants of Iris and Azalea?"

"Something he didn't want us to hear, that's certain. Say, where is he from, anyway?"

"Some place about four hundred miles from here—Cloudy Cove, I think he said."

"And he drives that far every few days to see Azalea and Iris? It looks fishy to me."

"I think so, too," Doris agreed. "The Misses Gates are lovely ladies—far too good for that loud creature—but at the same time they're scarcely the type a man would drive four hundred miles to see."

"He doesn't care a whit about them. You can tell that."

As they undressed, the girls continued to discuss Ronald Trent and to make disparaging remarks. Then Kitty jumped into bed and Doris put out the light. Snuggling down into the covers, they shivered a bit as the wind rattled the window pane. They could almost imagine that in the pitch dark room someone was slowly creeping toward them.

"I'd hate to stay here very long," Kitty whispered. "Folks are so funny. Even Henry and Cora."

"I'm eager to find out why they sent for me," Doris whispered in return. "It looks to me as though there's something strange going on here."

Save for the moaning of the wind, the old house was quiet, and presently the girls heard the front door slam shut.

"That was my illustrious cousin departing," Doris murmured.

A few minutes later they heard two doors close farther down the hall and knew that Azalea and Iris had retired.

The girls closed their eyes and tried to go to sleep, but the brushing of the branches against the windows, and the weird sounds made by the wind, kept them in a state of nervous suspense. Then, just as Doris was dozing off, she heard a low whimpering moan from the yard below.

"Wags!" she whispered to Kitty.

"Maybe he'll stop," her chum suggested.

But Wags did not stop. He continued to whimper until the girls were afraid he would disturb the entire household.

"Poor thing!" Doris sympathized. "He's out there all alone in a strange place. I'll bet he's lonesome."

At last, unable to bear it any longer, she slipped out of bed and began to dress.

"What are you going to do?" Kitty whispered.

"I'm going to bring him up here for the night."

"Cora will just about kill you, if she catches you!"

"I'll sneak down so quietly no one will hear me."

"I don't like to stay here alone while you're gone, Dory. It's too scarey."

"Then come along."

"Ugh! It's too far."

Doris had finished dressing and now, without making a light, she moved cautiously toward the door.

"Don't be gone long," Kitty pleaded in a whisper. "If Wags lets out a yelp while you're bringing him upstairs, we're sunk!"

Quietly opening the door, Doris stood and listened. The old mansion was quiet save for the whistling of the wind and the rattling of doors and windows. Hesitating a moment, she noiselessly

stole down the hallway. She was not afraid of being heard for she knew Azalea and Iris had rooms in the other wing.

At the head of the stairway she halted in astonishment. Below her she caught the glimmer of an oil lamp. To her further amazement she saw two men sitting at the table and instantly recognized them as Ronald Trent and Henry Sully!

Doris's first impulse was to retreat. Then, realizing that she was standing in the dark and could not be seen, although she could plainly see what the others were about, she was tempted to remain. Instinctively, she had sensed that all was not as it should be. She distinctly remembered hearing Ronald Trent leave the house before the Misses Gates had retired. Why, then, had Henry Sully admitted him again and so quietly that no one had been the wiser?

She listened intently so as not to miss a word the men were saying.

"Any mail today, Hank?" she heard Ronald Trent mutter.

"No, but we'll git something soon, I hope," Henry answered so low that Doris scarcely caught the words. "Takes a while to git mail from the oil fields, I reckon."

"Wish things would start breaking our way for a change," Ronald said. "First thing we know that smart-looking Force kid will throw a wrench

into the works and ruin our plans. I need money bad, too."

"You ain't the only one."

"Everybody does," growled Trent softly.

"I can't stand this outfit much longer," mumbled Henry dejectedly.

"How's the crowd in town treating you?" inquired Trent, a bit maliciously. "The town officials haven't decided on a clean-up week, have they?"

"Naw, that's all right. But this law-abidin' flock make me tired. Too many females pokin' around—just too many," muttered Henry disgustedly, taking out his watch, and winding the stem thoughtfully, tilting his head to one side in an attitude of alertness. The hour was growing late.

Doris shrank back, but there was no need. They were entirely unaware of her nearness.

Ronald Trent laughed suggestively. This made Doris's cheeks burn with embarrassment as he said, "Gee, that bunch of flowers smell good to me! I love the ladies, especially the pretty girlies, Henry. I'm not so hard to be friends with," the egotist mused. "I'm a swell dresser, too, everything the dames like."

Henry envied him his position with the Misses Gates, it was plain to be seen, as he accepted the statement with a nod of approval.

There was a pause as Ronald Trent took out a wallet and looked over it contents.

Doris waited in the dark hallway, unable to see the contents.

"The old dames are shutting down a bit," Ronald went on. "I had to play up to 'em tonight and got only two hundred at that."

"Too bad the old gals got that letter off to the red-head. That was one you missed, Trent."

This reference to her made Doris decide to creep a step or two nearer. She had heard enough to convince her that Henry and Ronald were conspiring against Azalea and Iris, the two trusting, flower-like ladies!

She strained forward to catch more of the conversation.

CHAPTER X

MEMORIES

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MEMORIES

HOWEVER, Doris was to learn no more that night, for as she moved softly down the stairs the two men pushed back their chairs.

"You'd better be gettin' out of here before those old gals find out what we're doing," he warned. "I'll let you out the back way."

They moved on to the kitchen and Doris, made bold by her knowledge of the underhanded scheme, came down into the living room. She heard the back door close as Ronald Trent hurriedly departed. A moment later, as the gate creaked, Wags gave another savage yelp.

Not until she heard Henry starting up the back stairs to his own quarters, did Doris dare venture to the door. Waiting until everything was still again, she quietly let herself out of doors.

Wags whimpered joyfully as she stooped down to unfasten him, and lifted up his paws. Doris picked him up, and holding him close, stole back into the house. She closed and locked the door behind her and listened. The coast seemed clear.

"Don't you dare bark!" she whispered to Wags.

Tiptoeing up the stairway, she anxiously wondered if she could reach her room without being discovered.

"Azalea and Iris are probably asleep by this time," she thought.

In this supposition she was not correct. The Misses Gates were at that moment lying wide awake in their adjoining rooms in the left wing, recalling vivid memories of their girlhood when each hoped to be the bride of the handsome John Trent.

Only a few close friends had understood why Doris's uncle had gone away without marrying either of the twins, for by turns he had appeared in love with each of them. Some people had jokingly remarked that he could not tell them apart and that this was his reason for giving them up. At any rate, he had never been able to choose between them and had gone away, leaving heartbreaks behind. For Azalea and Iris the locked gates at the front entrance to the mansion were symbolic of a past which could never be forgotten.

With the passing of the years, the Misses Gates clung tightly to their memories, and the appearance of John Trent's son had only served to freshen them. Perhaps in Ronald Trent they saw their lover of old. At any rate, they doted upon him and were flattered by his extravagant compliments. Believing that he was indeed the son of John Trent, they could not see his cheapness or his crude de-

vices for gaining their favor. They regarded him indulgently, as a mother might her son.

Shut away from the world by their own wishes, Azalea and Iris lived only for their dreams. Wickedness was to them nebulous and unreal. They had trusted Ronald Trent because it was in their nature to trust.

As Doris stole quietly up the stairway with Wags snuggled in her arms, her thoughts were bitter. What right had Ronald Trent to ingratiate himself with Azalea and Iris, only to trick them? Obviously, his motive was money.

"He won't get away with anything if I can help it!" she told herself.

As if to punctuate the thought, she unthinkingly gave Wags a tiny squeeze. He promptly yelped. Alarmed, Doris stopped and listened, but she could hear no one moving in the house. Quieting Wags, she continued up the stairs and down the long dark hall to her bedroom.

Letting herself in, she dropped Wags on the bed with a sigh of relief.

"I thought you never were coming," Kitty whispered. "What in the world made you take so long?"

"Lots of things," Doris told her impressively.

"I was scared to death here by myself."

"It was sort of scarey down where I was too, Kit. Listen! I have the most astonishing news!"

In a few terse sentences she then told her chum all she had overheard.

"Why, the mean old scamp!" Kitty exclaimed. "So you think he is after their money?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Do you suppose they have a lot?"

"I don't know, but I should think so. This house must be worth plenty."

Kitty and Doris were both ignorant of real estate values and did not know that if Locked Gates were placed upon the auction block, it would bring only a comparatively small sum. The house was not modern and had fallen into a general state of dilapidation.

"At least, I'm pretty sure that man isn't my cousin," Doris declared, "although Henry Sully did call him Trent."

"I knew there was something wrong with that man the minute I saw him," Kitty insisted.

Doris had finished undressing and slipped into bed. Wags snuggled down between the girls and they permitted him to remain, for his presence made them less afraid of the unseen dangers of the old mansion.

"What do you mean to do now that you've discovered that those men are plotting against Azalea and Iris?" Kitty asked.

"I don't know," Doris admitted doubtfully. "If they learn what we've discovered, there is no tell-

ing what they might do to us. They already suspect that I may try to make trouble. They called me a red-head! I'll show 'em a thing or two before I get through!"

"Will you tell the twins what you have learned?"

"Not right away. I want to get all the proof I can before I say anything to them. If I should make a mistake, they never would forgive me. You know, Kitty, I even hate to hear that man Trent laugh."

"To be honest with you, Dory, I do too."

"It seems so insincere."

"Yes," agreed Kitty. "Whenever he bursts out into one of those loud guffaws of his one just can't help but feel that he is doing something for effect—that there is not real honest effort back of anything he is planning or doing."

At this moment Wags, as if to comfort the two girls and to protect them from sinister wiles of those around them, stretched forth his little red tongue and tried to bestow a wet kiss on an ear of each of the girls.

"Dear little Waggsie, you are our friend, aren't you, even though we are not sure of the rest of them in this house?"

Wags gave a yawn of contentment, and snuggled closer between the girls.

"What do you suppose this Trent does to earn a living?" ventured Kitty.

"I can't imagine what he does, but he surely is well dressed, and has a snappy car."

"Dave said that car was a special imported model from France. They are very expensive—cost plenty, besides the transportation charges from the other side," replied Kitty.

"I wonder if Uncle John Trent was anything like this Ronald. Perhaps Uncle Ward never mentioned Ronald to me, because he was so loud and coarse. However, if Uncle really never knew he existed, he won't approve of him in our family circle now. This is really a dreadful thing to discover," and Doris sighed disconsolately, as she pushed back her soft hair that was massed over the pillow.

"Well, Doris, I think we're in for an adventure."

"It certainly looks like trouble after that conversation I just overheard between Trent and Henry," replied Doris.

"It was surely lucky they didn't see you in the dark hallway—that would have been unfortunate," and Kitty drew the coverlet over her bare, white arm, and shook her pillow into a more comfortable position.

Wags snored contentedly as if bored with hearing his bed-fellows chattering so late into the night.

"I'm not a bit sleepy, Kitty."

"Neither am I," responded her chum; "this has been such an exciting and thrillingly adventurous

day, with your playing detective and getting information, that I can't go to sleep. I'm thinking about it too much."

"When do you suppose we'll hear why we are here to visit?" inquired Doris of Kitty.

"Well, maybe the Misses Gates will tell us soon, and that will be helpful to place the motive."

Far into the night the girls continued to talk, but at length, from sheer weariness, they turned over on their sides and tried to sleep.

"Hope no one finds Wags here," Doris murmured drowsily as she closed her eyes. "We must wake up early in the morning and get him out of the house before any one is up."

CHAPTER XI

A SORROWFUL ROMANCE

DORIS and Kitty fully intended to awaken early, but when they did open their eyes the sun was streaming brightly in at the windows and some one was pounding on their door.

"Come in," Doris murmured sleepily.

Cora Sully thrust her head in at the door and glared at the girls.

"Do you think you can get your breakfast in bed?" she demanded harshly.

"What time is it?" Doris asked, sitting up and nudging Kitty, as a signal for her to keep Wags hidden under the covers.

Wags, however, had ideas of his own and at this unfortunate moment he gave a smothered yelp and pawed his way out from under the bed clothes. He leaped to the floor and darted playfully toward the housekeeper.

"How did that dog get in here?" Cora asked sharply. "*You* brought him up here last night," she accused Doris. "You little sneak!"

"I am not a sneak," Doris retorted. She had been confused and ashamed at the untimely discovery of her pet, but now that the housekeeper had made such an uncalled for remark, she was

inclined to defend herself. "We heard him barking and were afraid he would awaken every one in the house."

The explanation did not mollify the woman but rather seemed to fan the flame of her wrath.

"Yes, you are!" she snapped. "You just wanted an excuse to prowl about the house!"

"I did not!" Doris refuted. "It didn't seem right to leave Wags out there all by himself."

"You had no right to bring him into the house! I'll get him out of here!"

Vengefully, Cora bore down upon the dog.

Wags, sensing that she was an enemy to be avoided, whisked past her and leaped upon the bed. Cora began to tear viciously at the blankets in an effort to capture him.

By this time Kitty's arms had closed protectingly upon the little dog, and Doris had jumped out of bed.

"We'll take him downstairs just as soon as we get dressed," she declared. "Wags hasn't done any harm. Please don't get so excited about it!"

"I'll show you who's excited!" Cora muttered.

She had completely lost control of her temper and as Kitty rolled out on the opposite side of the bed, she made another dive for Wags. By this time Doris had lost all patience.

"Don't you dare touch my dog!" she said quietly. "If you do, I'll call the Misses Gates!"

The mention of the old ladies produced a surprising effect upon Cora. For the moment she seemed to forget about the dog and her resentment was turned upon Doris and Kitty.

"So you're trying to get me in trouble, eh?" she demanded harshly.

"No, of course not," Doris tried to explain. "We'll not say anything to the Misses Gates, if you'll go away and leave us alone. We didn't mean to do any harm and we're sorry we brought Wags up here, since it has caused you so much worry."

Cora cast baleful glances upon the girls.

"Had to come here interfering—" they heard her mutter wrathfully to herself.

"What did you say?" Doris asked.

"Nothing!"

"But I heard you say something about us coming here to interfere."

"Well, didn't you?"

"With what could we interfere?"

Cora shifted her weight uneasily and looked confused. She felt that she had said too much.

"You seem to be afraid of something," Doris observed shrewdly.

"Afraid!" the housekeeper snapped. "It's you who ought to be afraid. Let me tell you a thing or two. If you don't want to get into trouble, you'd better be starting back home!"

With that she flounced out of the room, leaving Kitty and Doris to stare blankly after her.

"Well did you ever?" Kitty exclaimed. "What did she mean by that?"

"I think she was threatening us," Doris said in a low tone, listening to make certain that the housekeeper had gone on down the hall. "She was excited and didn't know how much she was giving away."

"She undoubtedly thinks we're interfering with something."

"Their plans, of course. Undoubtedly, Cora is in on the scheme. We'll have to be careful not to let her suspect that we know anything."

"Perhaps we had better go home," Kitty suggested doubtfully. "I don't like the way things are happening."

"Oh, Kit, we don't want to go home now," Doris protested. "If we do, that horrid man will get all of the Misses Gates's money. We must help them if we can."

"I suppose so," Kitty sighed. "All right, I'm game if you are. We'll see it through to a finish. Thank goodness we have Wags with us, only I wish he were a bulldog so he could take a chunk out of any one that tries to annoy us."

"Wags isn't very popular now," Doris laughed, "and he's the sweetest little dog in the world. I don't see how folks can help but like him. Hurry

up, and get that other shoe on, Kit, or we never shall get downstairs."

Hastily the girls finished dressing, and carried Wags down to the porch where they once more tied him.

"Poor thing must be about starved," Doris said sympathetically. "After breakfast we'll see if we can't get a bone for him."

Returning to the living room they found Azalea and Iris waiting for them. Contritely, the girls apologized for oversleeping.

"It isn't very late," Iris said kindly. "Only nine o'clock and we seldom have breakfast before eight-thirty."

"We were tired last night," Kitty declared, "and we spent a lot of time talking. We'll see that it doesn't happen again."

"It really doesn't matter," Azalea assured her with a smile. "We were young once and remember how hard it was to get up early in the morning."

Breakfast was waiting and the four went at once to the dining room. As Cora served, she cast sullen glances at the two girls, and this was not lost upon them. Breakfast finished, Doris went to the kitchen to ask for something to feed Wags. As she had anticipated, the request met with a storm of anger, but the timely appearance of Iris caused Cora's manner to abruptly change. She

gave Doris a pan of scraps with a show of good grace.

"After you have fed your dog, you girls might like to see the garden," Iris suggested.

"Indeed we would."

Doris left the pan of food at the side porch and then, with Kitty and the Misses Gates, began a tour of the yard. She glanced curiously toward the locked gates at the front of the house and wondered if either of the ladies would offer an explanation.

Iris had brought her garden shears with her, and as they wandered about, she cut each of the girls a gorgeous bouquet of roses. Presently they came to a stone bench and a tiny lily pool and here they paused.

"How well I remember," Azalea murmured, half to herself, as she sank down upon the bench to rest, "it was just at this time of year that Iris and I first met John Trent. The roses were in bloom then, too."

Kitty and Doris exchanged quick glances, wondering if Azalea was about to branch into the story they had been waiting to hear. She remained silent for several minutes, and when she spoke again it was in a more matter-of-fact tone.

"I suppose you wonder why we invited you here, Doris. As I told you before, it is a long story, but if you would like to hear it—"

"Indeed I would!" Doris assured her eagerly.

"Your uncle, John Trent, was a very fine young man," Azalea began. "He was handsome and dashing—everything that a girl could wish for. Frequently he called at our home and Iris and I became very fond of him. Unfortunately, we never knew which one he liked better as he seemed devoted to both of us."

"It made us very unhappy," Iris took up the story. "You see, until John Trent came into our lives we had never had a disagreement. We dressed alike and we enjoyed the same things—we were rather proud of being twins. After we met John, things were entirely different. We no longer wished to resemble each other. Vying for his favor, we even refused to dress alike."

Though no mention was made of any bitter feeling, Doris, reading deeply, guessed that the two ladies had carried their rivalry to such an extent that they had come to actually hate each other. Undoubtedly, the affair had been the talk of the town.

"Finally Father stepped in and took a hand," Iris went on. "He told John that he must marry one of us before the end of the month or he would forbid him to ever step inside the gate again. Oh, it was dreadful!"

Here Iris's voice broke and she could not con-

tinue. After a few minutes Azalea tried to take up the story.

"The days passed and still John could not choose. Each hour was a nightmare to Iris and to me. We knew the townsfolk were aware of everything and were laughing behind our backs. We became nervous and fairly sick with it all. Father could not bear to see us suffer, and one afternoon, meeting John coming up the path to the house, he stopped him.

"I don't know what passed between them. Iris and I saw only what happened. Father spoke a few angry words to him and then they began to fight. John walked out of the gate, never to return."

"How unfortunate!" Doris murmured.

"Yes," Azalea said quietly, "but that was not the real tragedy. After their quarrel, Father staggered up the walk toward the house. We ran out, but before we could reach him, he fainted. He had always been afflicted with heart trouble, and the excitement was too much. In spite of everything the doctors did for him, he passed away in three days."

"How very sad!" Kitty said sympathetically.

"My poor Uncle must have felt dreadfully wicked when he learned of your father's death," Doris commented.

Iris nodded soberly.

"I imagine he did, for no one ever heard of him again."

As she spoke, Iris wiped the tears from her eyes and Azalea turned her head to hide her face. Doris felt a lump arising in her own throat as she considered the sorrowful end to the romance. She gazed thoughtfully toward the locked gates and a hush fell over the group.

CHAPTER XII

AN INTERLUDE

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AN INTERLUDE

Doris and Kitty thought that the Misses Gates had finished their story, but presently, after a long pause, Iris went on with difficulty:

"After the funeral we closed the front gates and locked them. To this day they have never been opened."

"We could not bear to remain in Rumson after all that had happened," Azalea said quietly. "We went to Europe—Iris to France and I to Germany. There we plunged into study in the hope that it would help us to forget. Finally, when the old wound was partially healed, we once more turned to each other and returned home."

"Then you both must be fluent linguists," Doris broke in eagerly.

"Yes," Iris agreed rather indifferently. "I speak French and Azalea has an excellent command of German."

"Then perhaps you could help me! My singing teacher says I must study French and German this summer."

"I am sure it would be a pleasure," Iris declared.

"Yes, indeed," Azalea added. "We have so little to occupy our time, and personally I shall be

glad of an opportunity to brush up on my German."

"We have troubled you enough for one day with our unhappy history," Iris said lightly. "Come, I will show you the rest of the garden."

Doris had hoped that the ladies would tell her why they had invited her to Locked Gates, but apparently they found it difficult to lead up to the subject.

Three days slipped by almost before the girls were aware of it. Once they had accustomed themselves to the quiet life of the mansion, they found it very enjoyable. They spent their mornings romping in the garden with Wags and their afternoons reading or sewing. Azalea and Iris left them alone a great deal, no doubt thinking the girls would have a better time by themselves. However, Kitty and Doris observed that the Misses Gates spent an hour of each day on the third floor, and as the ladies always took their Bible with them, they assumed that they were reading it there.

"Odd, isn't it?" Kitty commented to her chum. "You would think they could read it in the living room as well as any other place."

"Perhaps they don't like to do it when we are around," Doris suggested.

The girls did not mean to pry, but, suspecting that Cora and Henry Sully were aiding in a plot against the Misses Gates, they were more watch-

ful than they otherwise might have been. On one occasion, as they passed through a hall, they chanced to hear the two engaged in conversation.

"Don't see why they keep hangin' on here unless they're wise to something," Henry muttered to his wife.

"What could they know?" Cora had demanded sullenly. "If you keep a close tongue in your head, nothing will get out."

"You're the one that has the wagging tongue," Henry returned crossly. "I'd feel better if Trent would get back here. I'm for gittin' the thing over with as quick as we can. No telling what may queer the deal."

This snatch of conversation set Doris and Kitty to thinking anew of the sinister plot which was brewing. Yet, until they had learned more about Ronald Trent, they did not wish to alarm the Misses Gates. Since their arrival, Azalea and Iris had been very kind to them and had seemed to enjoy their company a great deal. Cora and Henry Sully had been most unpleasant, especially when there was no one about to observe their behavior, but the girls, knowing what lay behind the sullen actions, did not permit themselves to become annoyed.

"They mean to make it so unpleasant for us that we'll leave," Doris declared. "You know, Cora was hinting today that the mansion is haunted!"

"What!"

"Yes, she said that since Mr. Gates died, they have heard strange noises here at night."

"Doris, do you believe the place is—"

"Of course not," Doris laughed reassuringly. "You're old enough to know there aren't any ghosts."

"Yes," Kitty quavered, "but this house is old, and we have been hearing strange noises at night."

It was true that each night the girls had been disturbed by loud groans and the sound of gruff voices. Doris had wondered if Cora and Henry Sully were trying to frighten them, for certainly it was not the wind that they heard.

It was lonesome and gloomy in the right wing of the old mansion and the girls had come to dread the nights. They would have been less nervous if Wags had been permitted to stay with them, but he had been consigned to the shelter of the porch.

Several times Doris and Kitty had been tempted to tell the Misses Gates everything they had learned, but knowing how partial the two ladies were to Ronald Trent, they hesitated. It would be better, they decided, to wait for the plotters to make the first move.

Doris had wondered if Dave would visit her at the mansion but she had not dared to hope that he would come for at least a week. On the afternoon of the third day she was, therefore, greatly

surprised when she heard the rhythmical hum of an airplane motor.

"I wonder if it can be Dave?" she exclaimed to her chum.

Eagerly they watched as the plane swept closer. Then Doris recognized the familiar craft and scarcely could contain her excitement. The monoplane circled low and Dave waved to them. Finally he dropped a note to Doris telling her that he intended to come to see her soon. After that he turned back toward the airport.

"I suppose he's just out for a trial flight today," Doris declared.

When Kitty was not looking, she carefully folded the note and placed it in her pocket for future reference.

The sight of Dave, distant as it was, gave the girls a slight touch of homesickness, and for want of a better occupation they decided to write back to their friends. They had the library to themselves, for as usual Iris and Azalea had taken their Bible with them to the third floor.

"Jake certainly would enjoy this place," Doris commented as she sat at the desk with pen poised. "He likes mysteries and things that smack of the unusual."

"Jake has had an interesting past, didn't you say?"

"Yes, Uncle Ward rescued him from a bad gang.

I think Jake is still afraid of the old leader for he never uses his real name and always seems half afraid that some one he knows will find him. He is absolutely devoted to us now and would do anything in the world to help us."

"Then tell him to come down here and rid this place of ghosts," Kitty joked.

"I'll bet he could, all right. Jake wouldn't hesitate to plow right into them."

"Seriously, I wish he and that young man you call Marshmallow would ride out here. Perhaps they could help us to get a line on Ronald Trent."

"That's so," Doris agreed. "But why ring Marshmallow in on it? I guess you'd like to see him yourself, wouldn't you? I noticed you two took to each other on sight."

"I wouldn't mind seeing Marshall if he happened to be coming this way," Kitty admitted unembarrassed. "He's so jolly and—"

"Fat!" Doris finished mischievously.

"He is a little plump," Kitty admitted, "but I don't mind that."

"We might write to Marshmallow and tell him of our experiences here," Doris said thoughtfully. "It may be that we will need his help before we get home again."

The girls fell to writing their letters and for some time there was no sound other than the scratching of their pens. Kitty wrote home while Doris sent

messages to her uncle, to a girl friend in Chilton, to Dave, and to Marshmallow. She did not fail to include a cheery word for Jake.

Having finished their writing, the girls took the stamped letters and placed them in the mail box where the postman would gather them up early the next morning. They walked slowly back toward the mansion, Wags trotting contentedly at their heels.

Already it was dusk and the old mansion appeared wrapped in gloom. During the day the ancient house seemed less austere and mysterious, but by night it took on a character which filled the girls with uneasiness. Their imaginations tricked them into believing that shadowy forms might lurk behind the trees. They tried to shake off the mood, but always with the darkness it came.

"This is entirely different from Barry Manor," said Doris. "Fancy our sorority moving in here for a week-end, that surely would liven things up a bit, but would no doubt upset the lives of these two ladies who live so secluded and almost a hermits' existence."

"I don't see how the Misses Gates can stand to live here all the time," Kitty said as they turned toward the side door where Wags was to be tied for the night. "I'd be a nervous wreck. I wish they would hurry up and tell you why they invited you here."

"So do I," Doris returned earnestly. "I am sure they haven't told us all of their story. To speak of the past revives old memories and they keep putting it off. Ronald Trent may come back any day now and I want to learn just how matters stand before he gets here."

CHAPTER XIII

AN IMPORTANT REQUEST

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Doris and Kitty spent an unpleasant night in the right wing, for, as they had anticipated, the weird noises began shortly after they had retired. Once, hearing footsteps near their door, they clutched each other in an agony of fear, but the sound soon died away. They were on the verge of falling asleep when a strange noise from a distant part of the wing roused them into wakefulness.

"This is terrible!" Kitty whispered. "What can be going on in this dreadful house?"

"Perhaps it's only Cora or Henry astir," Doris suggested, but the explanation did not satisfy her, and Kitty refused to be comforted by it.

For long hours the girls lay awake, but once asleep nothing disturbed them and they awoke in the morning feeling refreshed in spite of the harrowing night.

"It's always something of a surprise each morning when I wake up and find I'm still alive," Kitty laughed.

At breakfast Iris chanced to remark that an old croquet set had been stored in the attic and Doris and Kitty asked if they might use it.

"Certainly," Iris assured them. "I'll get it out of the attic for you."

"Oh, let us get it ourselves," Doris begged. "I just love to poke around in attics. It's on the third floor above our wing, isn't it?"

Azalea and Iris exchanged quick, startled glances.

"Oh, no," Iris returned hastily. "The attic is in the left wing."

"But I thought there was a floor above our bedroom," Doris said, somewhat puzzled. "We've been hearing such queer noises at night."

"Mice undoubtedly," Azalea explained and arose from the table. "If you want to see the attic, come with me."

They went to the kitchen for a lantern and then mounted the stairs to the third floor above the left wing. Azalea unlocked the door and told them to look about as much as they liked.

After Azalea had gone back down stairs, Doris whispered to her chum:

"Didn't you think the twins acted funny when I asked about the third floor on our wing?"

"Yes, I did, Doris. They switched the subject, too."

The attic was something of a disappointment, for it was very clean and tidy. A number of boxes lined the walls, but each was plainly labeled as to its contents. Flashing the lantern about, the girls

saw that they contained blankets, woolens, old clothing, and numerous other articles.

"Nothing very exciting here," Kitty said. "It isn't any fun poking into boxes when they're all labeled. I wish the Misses Gates weren't such good housekeepers."

Doris had found the croquet set and, with Kitty's help, dragged it out into the light.

"We may as well take it down into the yard and have a game," she suggested.

"I suppose so," Kitty agreed. "I'd hoped we might stumble upon something interesting here, but I guess there's no chance of it. You know, Doris, I've read about folks finding false bottom trunks and things like that in their attics."

"I guess it happens only in stories. Anyway, I don't see any trunk here. If there's an attic above the right wing, I'll bet it's more interesting than this one."

Locking the attic door, the girls took the croquet set down to the front lawn and set up the arches. They played three games, Doris going down in ignoble defeat.

"Croquet isn't my game," she laughed. "I'd rather wield a tennis racquet than a mallet."

Soon tiring of the sport they amused themselves by throwing a rubber ball to Wags who would pick it up in his mouth and return it to them.

Presently Iris and Azalea brought their sewing

and came out to sit in the swing. They watched the girls for a time and then Iris called to them.

"Perhaps you would like to hear the rest of the story we were telling you the other day?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed," Doris declared.

"I'm afraid we're only boring you," Azalea murmured. "We have no desire to inflict our troubles upon you."

"Oh, but you aren't," Doris assured her. "We're both very much interested."

Leaving Wags to his own devices, the girls sat down in the swing beside the Misses Gates.

"You go on with the story," Azalea murmured.

Iris did not begin at once but sat for some minutes gazing away. At last, with a sigh, she forced herself to take up the broken threads.

"For thirty-two years after John Trent left, we heard no word from him," she said sadly. "Often we wondered what might have become of him. At first we thought perhaps he would write to one of us—at least to tell us that he was sorry for everything that had happened."

"And he didn't?" Doris asked.

"No, to this day our only message has been through his son. You may imagine our joy when Ronald came to see us here at the mansion. He resembles his mother more than his father, it seems, so we did not recognize him."

Kitty and Doris exchanged odd glances but Iris did not notice.

"Ronald told us that his father was dead," she continued in a low voice. "His wife had died before him, so Ronald was his heir. Before John passed away, he begged Ronald to return to Rumson and find the lovely Misses Gates. Those were his very words! 'Do all in your power to make them happy,' he said."

Here Iris paused to wipe her eyes.

"It was very dear of him to think of us at the last," Azalea said softly, "and very kind of his son to come this far with the message. He remembered us in a material way, too."

"Yes," Iris went on bravely. "It seems that after John left Rumson he accumulated a large fortune. He willed three-quarters of the estate to his son—which was as it should be—and the remaining quarter to Azalea and myself, to be divided equally."

"How considerate," Doris murmured.

"Yes," Iris agreed, "and just at this time the money will come in handy. You see, since Father died the estate has dwindled. We have this property, of course, but very little ready money."

"Unfortunately, we shall not be able to get our inheritance for some time," Azalea explained. "There are certain legal complications which I do not entirely understand. There seems to have

been some tangle about identifying poor John's body at the time of his death and the estate is tied up."

"Of course we shall get the money in the end," Iris declared, "but right now there are a number of attorney's fees to be met. Ronald is entirely without funds, so it was natural that he should come to us."

"You gave him money?" Doris asked, although she thought she knew the answer.

"Yes, we loaned him what we had, but our funds are running low," Azalea told her. "It isn't as if we were actually giving him the money, for in the end every one will be rich."

"Ronald says he will pay us back when the estate is settled," Iris added.

Doris and Kitty were so taken by surprise that for a minute they could think of nothing to say. The twins looked at each other in an embarrassed way, and it was evident that they scarcely knew how to go on.

"Unless we can raise money to meet the necessary attorney's fees, we will lose our inheritance," Azalea said. "We have nothing of value we can sell except this mansion, and we are too old to leave it after having lived here all these years.

"Ronald has been so impatient at our reluctance to do anything. Dear boy! One scarcely can blame him, for his fortune, too, is at stake, and he

does not understand how low our funds are." Iris hesitated as she finished lamely, "And so, after hours of debate, we decided that for the sake of your own uncle, Doris, we would ask you for money."

"Of course you understand we intend to will everything to you at our death," Azalea added hastily. "It will be your own uncle's money, so it will be entirely a family affair."

"That is why you invited me here?" Doris stammered.

"Yes," Iris told her. "You will help us, won't you?"

Doris did not know what to reply; in fact, the request left her a trifle dazed. She remembered that Marshmallow had jokingly told her the Misses Gates might ask for money, but she had not considered the matter seriously. She actually had believed that she was being invited to Locked Gates for the purpose of being informed of an inheritance of her own! What a blow to her hopes!

"I really don't know what to say," she murmured. "I must confess I have no idea how much money of my own I actually have."

"Of course this has all been very sudden," Iris said tactfully. "We can't expect you to decide upon the instant, but after thinking it over, if you decide you can spare the money, we shall be eternally grateful."

"Yes," continued Azalea, taking up the subject. Her sister sank back in the big, old-fashioned rocker, like one in need of rest. "We realize the importance of not neglecting this business a day longer. You will consider it soon, won't you, Doris, dear?"

She, too, now leaned back in her chair with something of a sigh of relief, making Doris aware of the fact that her assistance was expected and counted upon by her hostesses, who could from now on assume that she would lift their burden permanently.

Just then Cora, without any warning of her approach, entered the room, carrying a number of letters and several newspapers. She glanced at the faces of the thoughtful group, as though she were to be asked to remain, should her advice or assistance be required. However, they were so absorbed in what they had been discussing that they did not notice Cora's being there, and, receiving no word of encouragement to remain, even for a moment, she bustled out of the door.

Wags bounded into the room, and came straight up to Doris, attempting to jump into her lap and to lick her hands and face caressingly.

Doris was glad of the interruption, for this gave her an opportunity to get up from her chair and shake the playful puppy off her lap.

As soon as she gracefully could do so, Doris ex-

cused herself and went to her room. She wished to be alone that she might think over what the twins had told her.

"Can it be that I have made a mistake about Ronald Trent?" she asked herself.

After all, she had heard him say only that he was having trouble securing money from the two sisters. But why, if his motives were honest, was he in league with Cora and Henry Sully?

Doris admitted that the problem was too weighty for her to solve at once.

CHAPTER XIV

A VALUABLE FIND

Doris found herself unable to reach any decision concerning the loan which the Gates twins had asked her to make, and the following morning she was still thinking of the matter. Azalea and Iris tactfully avoided mentioning the subject at the breakfast table but she knew that it was foremost in their minds.

Any day Ronald Trent might return and when he came, he would expect the money. Doris disliked the man and had no desire to help him, but she felt sorry for the Misses Gates and wished that she could aid them in obtaining their inheritance. If only she knew that Ronald was acting honestly and in good faith!

After the morning work had been done, Azalea and Iris joined the girls on the lawn. Conversation was rather labored and it was obvious to Doris that the twins were under a strain.

"I am sorry we told you our troubles," Iris said after a time. "It has ruined your visit, and you undoubtedly think that our sole reason for inviting you here was to ask for money."

"Oh, no," Doris assured her hastily. "I have

enjoyed every minute here at Locked Gates. And I truly want to help you. I was thinking—"

She did not continue for just at that moment she caught the faint hum of an airplane engine. Scrambling up from the grass, and shading her eyes with her hand, she gazed eagerly skyward trying to locate the sound.

"I'm sure I heard an airplane, but I can't see it. The sun is so bright!"

"Must have been your imagination," Kitty teased. "Dave was here only the other day."

"It is an airplane!" Doris cried excitedly. "And it's coming this way! Oh, I hope it's Dave."

The Misses Gates laid down their sewing and watched the approaching plane with interest. Doris and Kitty were highly elated when they distinguished the red stars on the wings.

"Wonder if he's going to drop another note?" Kitty murmured. "Aren't you the lucky girl to have a flying Romeo?"

For once, Doris was not annoyed by her chum's teasing. She was far too interested in watching the plane to even listen closely to what Kitty was saying.

They waved frantically as the plane approached. Two young men were in the cockpit, Dave and another pilot, and they both returned the greeting.

The plane circled over the mansion several times and Dave indicated that he intended to drop a

message. They saw something white flutter from his hand.

The weighted note struck a nearby rhododendron bush, but, before the girls could reach it, Wags scooted ahead of them, thinking that it was a variation of his favorite game of "fetch the ball."

"Wags!" Doris cried.

The little brown dog turned to regard her with surprise, and that gave the girls an opportunity to catch up with him. But before they could lay restraining hands upon him, he made another bolt for the rhododendron bush.

As Wags snapped up the bit of paper in his mouth, Doris and Kitty made a flying leap toward him. In the mad scramble the girls lost their balance and at the same moment clutched at the rhododendron branches for support. To their horror, their combined weight uprooted the bush and it suddenly gave way from the soft earth, sending them sprawling backwards.

Still clutching part of the bush they picked themselves up and looked to see what had become of Wags. He was standing not three yards away regarding them with saucy little eyes which seemed to say: "If you want this old paper just try to get it!"

They tried to coax him nearer, but he would not come, and as soon as they started toward him he would dart away, only to pause whenever they

showed signs of giving up the chase. At last they managed to drive him into a corner and there, with considerable impatience, extracted the note from between his teeth.

Returning to the Misses Gates they humbly apologized for having broken the rhododendron bush, but the ladies had thoroughly enjoyed the wild chase and assured them that it was of no consequence.

"We had been planning to have that bush dug out," Azalea laughed, "but you girls saved us the bother."

"I think it very romantic to have a love letter delivered by airplane," Iris declared.

Doris blushed.

"Oh, it isn't a love letter," she returned as she ripped open the envelope. "Dave isn't a bit silly."

Perhaps because she wished to prove her statement, she read the note aloud:

"If you and Kitty are free tomorrow and the Misses Gates have no objection, I shall drop in and take you for an airplane ride. Say about one o'clock, then we can have the entire afternoon. Dave."

"Oh!" Kitty cried in delight. "I've always wanted to ride in a plane."

"So have I," Doris agreed enthusiastically. She glanced hopefully at Azalea and Iris. "May we go?"

"Why, certainly," Azalea declared. "But aren't you a little afraid?"

"Not with Dave," Doris returned proudly. "Every one says he is a reliable pilot and I know he wouldn't offer to take us if he didn't know it would be safe."

The girls had been so excited over the note that they had failed to keep track of Wags. Turning, they were amused to see him pawing energetically near the uprooted rhododendron bush. Dirt was flying in every direction.

"What's that little rascal after now?" Doris laughed.

"Probably a bone."

"I'll go see."

She crossed the garden just as Wags picked up something in his mouth.

"Here, Wags, bring it here!" Doris commanded.

Wags hesitated, debating whether or not to obey, and then came forward, dropping his offering at his mistress's feet.

"What in the world!" Doris exclaimed.

She picked up the curious object. It was a tiny box, water soaked and badly stained, and bore evidence that it had been buried for some time. Yet, for all its disfigurement, Doris saw that it was a jewel box.

"Kitty!" she cried. "Come here!"

Her chum already was flying toward her.

"Look what the dog dug up!" Doris exclaimed in excitement. "It's a jewel box!"

"Well, don't stand there staring at it," Kitty chided. "Open it quick!"

Doris lifted the lid and gave a little cry of wonder. She scarcely could believe her own eyes.

There, nestled in a cushion of faded blue silk, lay a beautiful ruby ring! Doris saw at a glance that it was a genuine stone, and valuable.

"A ring!" Kitty gasped. "Where did it come from?"

"Under that rhododendron bush. It must have been there for ages. See how old the case is."

"What a perfectly gorgeous stone!" Kitty said, her eyes shining with admiration. "Some one must have lost it, don't you think?"

"But it was *buried,*" Doris reminded her. "If we hadn't uprooted that rhododendron bush, we'd never have discovered it."

The excited comments of the girls had brought the Misses Gates hurrying across the yard. They too exclaimed in admiration as they saw the ring.

"Where did you get it?" Azalea asked tensely.

"I took it away from Wags," Doris informed her. "It must have been buried under that bush."

"But why was it put there?" Iris murmured. "I can't understand it."

"I thought perhaps it might have been a family jewel," Doris suggested.

"Oh, no," Azalea protested. "I never saw the ring before in my life."

"Isn't there any clue as to the identity of the owner?" Kitty questioned.

"There doesn't seem to be," Doris responded.

She lifted the ring from the tiny case and as she did so, noticed for the first time a scrap of paper, yellowed with age.

She read the name on it at a glance and a startled expression came into her eyes.

"It says 'John,'" she said in a strained voice.

"John!"

Echoing the name, Azalea began to tremble. Iris's face had gone chalk white.

Doris had turned the paper over and was reading something upon the back. The twins scarcely heard her.

"To my beloved sweetheart," the note said, "the one I have chosen to be my wife. This ring is a sign of my decision. Please wear it always."

"He *did* choose," Doris declared tensely.

Azalea and Iris stood as motionless as statues.

"But which one?" Azalea murmured.

Doris looked again at the message. It was so old and yellow that it was difficult to make out the writing, but unquestionably neither of the twins had been mentioned by name. Her silence communicated this to the others.

"If only we had known—" Iris murmured

brokenly. "What a difference it might have made. That fatal night when Father—"

She choked and could not go on.

"It's the most beautiful ring I ever saw," Kitty declared.

She restrained her enthusiasm, noting that it seemed to pain the Misses Gates.

"Of course it belongs to you," Doris said quietly, "even though your names aren't mentioned." She extended the ring toward the two ladies.

Iris straightened proudly and Azalea turned coldly away.

"It doesn't belong to me," she said tartly.

"I won't touch it!" Iris declared indignantly.

"But it must belong to one of you," Doris insisted. "What shall we do with it?"

Azalea was already walking rapidly toward the house. Iris, as pale as a ghost and looking as though she were about to cry, likewise turned away.

"I don't care what you do with it," she said. "I'll never touch it as long as I live!"

Doris and Kitty, left in possession of the ring, stared at it rather blankly.

"Well, of all things!" Kitty exclaimed. "Do you think they'll change their minds?"

"I'm afraid not. This note and the ring have opened up old wounds. Now they'll always be tortured by thinking of what might have been."

Being hampered by no sentimental attachments

themselves, the girls each tried on the ring. It was too large for Kitty but it fit Doris's third finger.

"The setting is certainly old fashioned," Kitty commented, "but can't you imagine how gorgeous it would look in a modern one! I think the Misses Gates are foolish not to want it."

"The question is, what shall we do with it? We can't very well wear it around in front of them. They're so sensitive. And the ring doesn't belong to us."

"It doesn't belong to any one," Kitty declared. "The poor thing is an orphan! Until some one turns in a claim, though, let's pretend it's ours. This will probably be the nearest we'll ever come to owning a ruby ring!"

She pirouetted around the room gaily, like a ballet dancer doing a special number, flashing the ring upon her finger.

"Careful, young lady," admonished her chum. "Since it doesn't fit you, you may fling it away in your ballet performance, never more to see the romantic jewel."

She stopped her twirling and gazed at the sparkling gem upon her finger.

"It must be a perfect stone," surmised Kitty, as she glanced admiringly at the jewel which caught the lights in its rich, deep tones.

"And more than that, think of the romance and

the tragedy hidden away in its very heart," and Doris glanced thoughtfully in the direction of the Locked Gates that appeared even more forbidding and austere since this new connection with them had been established.

A moment of silence followed, and Doris thought suddenly of her friend Dave, and wondered what he would think of the token and the story it symbolized.

CHAPTER XV

QUESTIONABLE CHARACTERS

THE Misses Gates did not appear at luncheon but kept to their individual rooms. Azalea sent word by Cora that she was ill with a headache and preferred to be alone; Iris offered no excuse. Kitty and Doris knew that they were still upset over the finding of the ruby ring.

"I almost wish Wags hadn't dug it up," Doris remarked dolefully. "It's making the poor ladies feel so unhappy."

The girls ate a rather forlorn meal in the big dining room. Cora waited on them in a more slipshod manner than usual and took no pains to conceal her dislike. Shortly after luncheon, they saw her leave the premises by the back gate.

"I'll venture the Misses Gates don't know she's leaving," Doris commented. "Cora thinks they'll not find out she's gone."

The mansion seemed very quiet and desolate to the girls, and they found it difficult to settle down to reading.

"Why not see something of the town ourselves?" Doris suggested by way of a question. "We're in for a dull time here this afternoon if we don't bestir

ourselves. Anyway, I must send Dave a message telling him we'll go with him tomorrow."

"Suits me fine," Kitty agreed, putting aside her book. "But what shall we do about the ring? We can't very well take it with us. We might be robbed."

At a loss to know what to do with the ruby, Doris had carried it around in her pocket, but now she removed the tiny case and studied it in perplexity.

"I wish the Gates sisters would accept it," she murmured. "I'm scared to death we'll lose it."

"They won't take it," Kitty returned, "and you know it will pain them to bring up the subject again."

"We can't wear the ring, that's certain, for it isn't ours. We'll have to hide it somewhere."

"But where?"

"How about our bedroom?"

"You know Cora goes snooping around there. She might find it."

"I know!" Doris exclaimed. "We'll hide it under the mattress. No one would ever think of looking there!"

"Great!" her chum approved. "Let's do it now, while the coast is clear."

They hurried upstairs and, closing the bedroom door, secreted the tiny jewel case beneath the mattress, taking care to rearrange the covers.

"Now we can forget about it," Kitty declared.

However, both girls knew that as long as the ruby ring remained in their possession, they could not forget its existence. It was certain to give them many uneasy moments.

Satisfied that for the time being the jewel was safe, they left the mansion by the back gate.

Locked Gates was located at the edge of Rumson but it was only a short walk to the main part of the little city. The girls stopped first at the post office where they dispatched an air mail letter to Dave.

Then, as time rested heavily upon them, they dropped in at a corner drug store for an ice cream soda. Doris bought a few things she needed, and they continued down the street with no particular destination in view.

Not being acquainted with the town, they unwittingly turned down a street which led them toward the poorer section. They had gone a considerable distance before they realized their error.

"Let's turn back," Doris suggested. "I don't like the appearance of this street. There are so many pool halls and gambling places."

Abruptly they retraced their steps but, before they had gone far, Doris caught her chum by the sleeve.

"Look!" she commanded. "Isn't that Henry Sully just ahead of us?"

"It is!" Kitty agreed. "We'll meet him face to face!"

The man was walking toward the girls, but his head was lowered and he had not seen them. While he was still at least a hundred yards away, he turned into an old tumbledown building which opened off the street.

As Kitty and Doris passed the place a few minutes later, they surveyed it rather curiously and were not surprised to see that it was probably a gambling house.

"So that's the way he spends his time!" Doris commented. "I guess he knew the Misses Gates were in their rooms and that he would have a good chance to slip away with no questions asked."

"Did you notice the way he walked, Dory?"

"Yes, I did. His head was down—sort of flopping all around. And he walked with such a precise step as though he were trying not to stagger."

"I'll bet he's had about one drink too many."

"Probably six would be more like it. Do you suppose the Misses Gates know he drinks?"

"Oh, I'm sure they don't. You know how strict they are about such things."

"I think it's time they find out about their help, then. I don't see how they can be so blind."

They continued down the street and presently had forgotten about Henry Sully. The town was soon explored and they were thinking of returning

to the mansion when Kitty suggested that they attend a moving picture show.

"All right," Doris agreed, "if we can find anything good."

They had noticed a number of theaters near the post office and turned that way.

"We're coming to one now," Kitty observed a few minutes later. "Can you make out the sign?"

"Oh, we don't want to go there," Doris said hastily. "It's one of those cheap places that cater to folks with perverted tastes."

They were about to pass on without a glance at the advertisements when they noticed a familiar figure. Of one accord they paused and pretended to be looking at the window display of a candy shop adjoining the theater.

"It's Cora Sully!" Kitty whispered to her chum. "She's buying a ticket."

Without glancing in their direction, the woman entered the moving picture house.

"Aren't they a pair!" Doris exclaimed in disgust. "Henry half drunk in a gambling place and Cora here at this cheap movie! I don't see how Azalea and Iris can tolerate them—they are so refined themselves."

"Either they don't know about it, or they must have some very special reason for keeping them. Didn't they say Cora was the daughter of their former dressmaker?"

"Yes, perhaps they keep the couple out of sheer sentiment. I'm sure if I were in their place I'd send Cora and Henry away in a hurry."

Farther on down the street the girls found a picture house which satisfied them and they purchased tickets. The show lasted for two hours and when they left the theater, it was nearly supper time.

"We must be getting back to the mansion," Doris declared. "Before we go, though, I have a notion I ought to put in a telephone call to the bank at Chilton and find out how much money I have there. I'd ask Uncle Ward but he's still out of town campaigning for that Fresh Air Fund."

"Then you've decided to loan the Misses Gates the money they want?"

"Oh, I haven't decided anything. I don't know what to do! I thought if I found out exactly how much money I have, it might be easier to decide."

"It won't take very long to put the call through," Kitty urged. "Why don't you?"

Doris consulted her wrist watch.

"The bank is closed by this time, but I am sure there will be some one there who can tell me what I want to know. We'll try it, anyway."

They turned in at the next drug store and, after a brief wait, Doris was connected with her party. After a few minutes she received the information she sought and came back to Kitty, who was waiting outside the booth.

"Did you find out?" she demanded.

Doris nodded. Her eyes were shining.

"Why, Kit, I have a lot of money. From what Uncle Ward told me the other day I thought I was almost poverty stricken."

"How much?"

"Nearly six thousand dollars. Five thousand nine hundred and forty-three, to be exact."

"Why, you're rich, Dory!" Kitty exclaimed in awe.

"Hardly that, but I'll have enough to last me for a long time."

Both girls, blissfully ignorant of how much it cost to live, considered Doris's little hoard a miniature fortune.

"When I have so much, it seems a shame not to make a small loan to Iris and Azalea," Doris said thoughtfully.

"They promised you'd get it all back," Kitty encouraged. "In the end you'll come into the Trent inheritance."

"There's only one drawback."

"What's that?"

"Cousin Ronald is to handle the money." Doris sighed as one who was burdened with great business responsibilities. "Oh, dear, I wish I liked him better. If I could entirely trust him, I'd offer the money in a minute!"

CHAPTER XVI

A PLEASANT ADVENTURE

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THE next morning when Doris and Kitty came downstairs for breakfast, they were relieved to see that the Misses Gates were there ahead of them. However, they noticed at once that for the first time since their arrival at the mansion, the two ladies were dressed differently.

"That means they've been quarrelling," Doris told herself.

Iris and Azalea spoke pleasantly to the girls but their faces were wan and strained. They avoided speaking to each other and scarcely glanced at one another. Kitty and Doris, distressed at the situation, were very glad that they had accepted Dave's invitation to go for a ride in his plane. It would be a relief to get away from the mansion. The place was beginning to get on their nerves.

Azalea and Iris ate very little, making the girls feel somewhat guilty concerning their own hearty appetites. All mention of the ruby ring was carefully avoided, but the subject was uppermost in the minds of the four. Conversation languished and the Misses Gates obviously were relieved when breakfast was finished.

During the night Doris had tried to make up her mind what was the best thing to do in regard to the loan which the Misses Gates had requested, but she had been unable to reach a decision. Now, as she saw how very unhappy the two ladies were and how strained was the relationship between them, she wished that she might do something to help the situation before she and Kitty left on their outing.

"I'll lend them the money," she thought. "Perhaps the news will cheer them a bit."

Accordingly, as they were leaving the dining room, she turned to Azalea and Iris.

"Yesterday when Kitty and I were in Rumson, I telephoned my bank," she told them, "and I found that I have more money in my account than I had anticipated. So I've been thinking it over and have decided to let you have some of it."

"Oh!" Azalea exclaimed, her face lighting up. "How very kind of you."

"You're sure you can spare the money?" Iris asked.

"The bookkeeper said that I had six thousand dollars," Doris admitted, "so I can let you have only five hundred. If that will be of any help—"

"Indeed it will," Azalea declared. "I cannot tell you how grateful we are."

"And Ronald will appreciate it, too," Iris added. "It means so much to us just at this time. Of course, in the end you will get it all back."

"I am glad to do what I can to help," Doris told them.

Already she was pleased to see that the tension between Iris and Azalea was somewhat relaxed. She hoped that before the day was over they would have forgotten their foolish quarrel.

As Dave had stated that he would call for the girls about one o'clock, they began to watch for him soon after luncheon. As the airport was some distance from the mansion, they expected him to come for them in a car, and accordingly kept close watch of the road.

Presently an automobile drove up, and Doris and Kitty, thinking it must be Dave, snatched up their wraps and started for the gate. Halfway down the path they saw they had made a mistake. Ronald Trent was getting out of his roadster.

"Hello, girlies," he greeted with a sickening smile as he opened the gate. "Coming to meet me, eh?"

"No, we weren't," Doris returned. "We are waiting for a friend of ours."

"We're going for an airplane ride," Kitty added.

"High fliers, eh?" Ronald smirked, and then laughed loudly at his own inane joke.

Doris and Kitty did not even smile. They wished that he would go on into the house and leave them alone.

"Who is that flying sweetheart of yours?" he teased.

"He isn't a sweetheart and you don't know him," Doris replied somewhat coldly. "Come on, Kitty."

They started to walk to the gate but the man called them back.

"Just a minute. Aren't you forgetting something?"

The girls paused and looked at him in surprise. Ronald came over to Doris and leaned unpleasantly close.

"Haven't you forgotten to give Cousin Ronald a goodbye kiss?"

Indignantly, Doris recoiled.

"I'm not in the habit of kissing strangers!" she snapped. "That remark was entirely uncalled for!"

"Come now, don't be bashful," Ronald cajoled.

He edged nearer and caught her by the hand. Doris jerked away and faced him with blazing eyes.

"Don't you dare touch me!"

Undoubtedly, Ronald would have pressed his unwelcome attentions, but just at that instant an automobile drove up to the gate.

"Oh, well, we'll save it until the next time," he said with a shrug.

Chuckling gleefully to himself, he went on up the path toward the house.

"Oh, how I hate that man!" Doris muttered in an undertone to her chum. "I wanted to slap his face!"

"I wish you had!"

They said no more, for turning toward the gate they saw that Dave had arrived. Eagerly he sprang from the taxicab and came to meet them. Noticing Doris's flushed and angry face he asked what was the matter.

"Oh, it was that horrid cousin of mine," she told him. "He tried to get fresh."

"He did?" Dave demanded sharply. "Say, I'll just go after him and tell him a thing or two!"

Doris placed a restraining hand on his sleeve.

"No, you mustn't do that. Iris and Azalea would never forgive us for creating a scene. I don't doubt but that it's just his way."

"Well, he'd better change it if he doesn't want to get into trouble with me!"

With a scowl directed at the back of the retreating Cousin Ronald, Dave opened the gate for the girls and helped them into the taxi.

"I thought perhaps you wouldn't entirely trust me as a pilot," he declared as they were speeding rapidly toward the airfield, "so I brought along an expert. There isn't a better pilot to be had than Don Everts. He's waiting for us at the field."

"You know we'd trust you," Doris protested quickly.

Dave grinned.

"Well, anyway, I thought it would give me a better chance to talk with you girls."

A few minutes later the cab turned in at the flying field and came to a standstill near a row of hangars. Dave helped the girls to alight and paid the driver.

"This way," he directed, leading them toward a monoplane at the far end of the runway.

Quickly he introduced Don Everts, the pilot, a lean chap in helmet and dungarees. The girls found him very quiet and self-contained, but liked him at once.

They took their places in the cockpit and Dave smiled at them reassuringly. The pilot carefully examined the controls and then nodded to the mechanic who stood waiting to swing the propeller.

"Switch off?"

"Switch off!" the pilot confirmed tersely.

"Contact?"

"Contact!"

The mechanic gave the propeller a mighty swing and the engine began to roar. To Doris and Kitty it was all very thrilling.

"All set?" Dave questioned after the engine had warmed up.

Kitty and Doris nodded grimly.

The monoplane had headed into the wind, and as Don Everts opened the throttle, it moved rapidly across the field. The girls held their breath, but almost before they were aware of it, the plane had taken to the air and leveled off.

It no longer seemed to Kitty and Doris that they were traveling swiftly, for the plane appeared to be almost stationary in the sky.

"Not going very fast, are we?" Doris asked Dave.

"Ninety-eight miles per!" he shouted back.

Glancing down, the girls saw the earth pass slowly in review before them. They made out a few buildings but it was difficult to believe that the miniature structures comprised the town of Rumson.

The day was an ideal one for flying, with very few clouds visible. That the girls might enjoy the novelty of their ride to the utmost, the pilot presently zoomed up above a small bank of mist and permitted them to look down upon the fleece-like floor.

For Doris and Kitty, who were having the thrill of their lives, the time passed all too swiftly. When Dave told them that they had been in the air nearly two hours they were amazed.

"I haven't had so much fun in ages," Doris declared enthusiastically, after they had landed safely at the air field.

"I'll take you up again," Dave promised, "and now that I know you won't be afraid, I'll pilot you myself some time. I should have my license in a little while."

Leaving the monoplane to the care of an at-

tendant, the two young men escorted the girls to a taxicab and took seats beside them.

"You know, I was thinking perhaps we could get up a picnic one of these days," Dave suggested as they drove toward the mansion. "Marshmallow has been hinting that he wants to be included."

"I think a picnic would be lots of fun," Doris declared, "and by all means let's have Marshmallow. He always brings the best things to eat! Of course that isn't my reason for wanting him," she added hastily, as the others began to laugh.

During the flight Dave had chanced to remark that Don Everts had formerly piloted an air mail plane and had a flying acquaintance with nearly every town and city in the east. Doris had been longing to ask him if he had ever passed over Cloudy Cove and now she broached the subject.

"My cousin comes from there," she explained.

"Cloudy Cove?" the pilot repeated thoughtfully. "Sure, I remember the place. It's in Massachusetts. City of about thirty or forty thousand, I'd say."

The taxicab drew up at the rear gate of the old mansion, and the four alighted. Doris noticed that Ronald Trent's red roadster was still parked nearby.

"Won't you come in?" she asked the two young men. "It isn't late yet."

They accepted with alacrity and the girls led the way to the house.

"I hope Cousin Ronald doesn't try any more of his foolishness," Doris said in an undertone to Kitty.

Entering the house they found the Gates twins and Ronald in close conference. Doris thought Azalea and Iris looked somewhat relieved as the group came into the living room and wondered what her cousin had been saying to disturb them.

The twins were delighted that the girls had brought their friends into the house, and at once made them feel at ease, but Ronald frowned as though he considered it an intrusion. He spoke agreeably enough to Dave when introduced, but it was apparent to the girls that they took an instant dislike to each other.

While the Misses Gates chatted pleasantly with Doris and her friends, Ronald fidgeted in his chair and kept glancing at his watch. After a few minutes he abruptly arose and, with only a few words spoken quietly to Azalea and Iris, departed.

After that, Doris sang a number of songs which met with enthusiastic approval. Azalea rang for the tea things and, as the hour grew late, Dave and his friend regretfully took their departure.

"Don't forget the picnic," the girls were reminded by Dave as he said goodbye. "We can decide upon the date and the place later on."

"We will watch for your message," assured Kitty.

"A summer without a picnic wouldn't be a summer at all," sang Doris, as the two girls waved goodbye and opened the back gate.

CHAPTER XVII

A DOG'S DISCOVERY

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DORIS and Kitty did not spend a comfortable night. Since the ruby ring had been given into their keeping, they found themselves unable to sleep as soundly as before and the slightest noise caused them uneasiness.

Retiring early as was their custom since coming to Locked Gates, they dropped off almost at once, but some time after midnight they were suddenly awakened by a wild cry. To the frightened girls it sounded strangely like some one in distress.

"This house gets more creepy all the time," Kitty whispered shakily. "That couldn't have been the wind."

"No," Doris agreed, "it sounded like a human voice to me. I wish we weren't alone in this wing."

After that they lay awake for several hours, but the cry was not repeated. Finally they fell asleep again, and when they opened their eyes the morning sun was shining brightly in at the windows.

Somewhat ashamed of their fears, now that it was broad daylight, the girls did not mention the subject at the breakfast table. Azalea and Iris

appeared more cheerful than on the previous day and Doris was glad to see that they were both wearing blue dresses, a sign that they had partially forgotten their disagreement.

Before breakfast had been finished, Ronald Trent put in his appearance. The girls were surprised at such an early call, but apparently Iris and Azalea knew what brought him, for they exchanged rather embarrassed glances. For once the man did not flatter and palaver with the ladies but turned his attention to Doris.

"Well, cousin," he began in his blustering way, "I hear you've promised to come across with five hundred dollars."

"I promised the Misses Gates that amount," she returned, placing stress upon the name.

"Well, it all amounts to the same thing," Ronald said easily. "Naturally, they'll turn the money over to me, so I can attend to the—the attorney's fees. It will save a lot of trouble if you will have the bank draft made out in my name. I'll tell you just how to do it."

"I have secured drafts before," Doris informed him.

"Smart little business woman, eh? How soon will you be able to get to the bank?"

"I suppose I could go today," Doris said quietly.

"Fine! Don't forget to have the draft made out in my name."

While they had been talking, Henry Sully had entered the dining room to ask the Misses Gates a question concerning the gardening work to be done that day, and now as Ronald turned around he gave the man a sly wink. Doris, who was by chance looking directly into the buffet mirror, saw the wink and immediately her suspicions were aroused.

"On second thought," she remarked, eying Ronald closely, "I don't believe I'll be able to get to the bank today."

The man wheeled and regarded her sharply.

"Why not?"

"Oh, I have some practising to do and I must study my French," Doris returned.

"I'll take you in my car."

"Thanks, but I really won't be able to make it today."

There was a ring of finality to her voice, but Ronald did not give up. Instead, he changed his tactics.

"A delay may mean the loss of the entire inheritance, Doris," he began in a soft, wheedling voice. "You don't realize how lucky you are to get into the good graces of the Misses Gates."

"They have been more than kind," Doris murmured, feeling very uncomfortable.

"Listen, cousin, you stick with me in this deal and you'll come out on top of the heap. Why, be-

fore you get through, you'll be rich. You'll sing in Grand Opera!"

"I'll try to get to the bank some time this week," she told him.

"But why not go today?"

"Really, Ronald, I don't think you should urge her," Iris interposed in her gentle voice. "I can't quite see the need for such haste. Surely the lawyers will wait a few days for their money."

"A lot you all know about business!" the man blurted out, and then caught himself and spoke more quietly. "I suppose we shall have to await the whim of this kid, but if we lose the entire fortune, don't blame me."

With that he strode out of the house, banging the door behind him. Henry, who had stood listening to the entire conversation, followed him without waiting for his orders.

"Ronald is so impetuous," Iris said apologetically to the girls. "You mustn't take him seriously. He really doesn't mean anything the way it sounds."

Doris and Kitty had their own idea as to that, but they permitted the matter to pass without stating their views. Breakfast finished, the Misses Gates went out into the garden and Kitty went to her room, taking Wags with her. Doris was left to practise her music, but for some time she sat idle at the piano.

"I wonder if I should have gone to the bank this morning?" she thought uncomfortably. "I don't want to do anything to jeopardize the fortune, and yet, try as I may, I simply can't trust that man!"

The conversation which she had overheard between Ronald and Henry Sully on the first night of her arrival came back to her. She remembered that Ronald had called the other man "Hank" and that they had appeared to be on unusually friendly terms. Perhaps in her desire to aid the Misses Gates she was overlooking a number of important facts. Was it not an unwise step to lend her money without first consulting her uncle?

At length she began to practise, but she could not concentrate, and after three-quarters of an hour decided to give it up.

She started up the stairs to find Kitty, but before she had gone very far down the hall leading to the right wing, she met her chum and Wags coming toward her. She saw at a glance that the girl was greatly excited.

"What's the matter?" she asked in surprise.

"Oh, Doris," Kitty whispered tensely. "I was just on my way to find you! I think I've discovered the source of those strange sounds that have been disturbing us at night!"

"What?"

"Wags is really responsible, because he led the

way. He ran off and I had to go after him. Quite by accident I stumbled upon this room."

"What are you talking about, Kitty?"

"Come, I'll show you. Follow me and don't make any noise."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FLOOR ABOVE

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THE FLOOR ABOVE

WONDERING what it was her chum had discovered, Doris followed her down the hall. Kitty paused at the door of their own bedroom.

"We'd better leave Wags here until we come back," she whispered. "He might take it into his head to bark at the wrong moment and give us away."

Leaving the dog in the bedroom, they listened to make certain that the coast was clear and then stole softly down the long dark hallway until they came to a flight of stairs leading to the attic floor.

"This is as far as I came when I chased Wags," Kitty whispered, "but I distinctly could hear the strangest sounds coming from that room at the top of the stairs. I was afraid to go on alone."

"Why, this must be part of the quarters occupied by the Sullys," Doris told her. "I've seen them go up the back stairs any number of times. Do you think we should go up when they aren't here? Cora is working in the kitchen and Henry is out in the garden."

"But just listen," Kitty commanded. "Some one is up there."

The girls listened intently and to their startled ears there came a low moan, not unlike the sound they had heard during the night.

"You don't suppose Henry *could* be up there?" Kitty whispered. "Perhaps he's drunk."

Doris shook her head.

"No, I saw him in the yard just before I came up to find you. It can't be either Cora or Henry."

"Then who can it be?"

"We'll find out."

Noiselessly, they crept up the stairs which creaked alarmingly underfoot. At the top of the landing they hesitated, a little afraid to open the door leading into the Sully suite. At last, summoning all of her courage, Doris turned the knob and pushed the door back a tiny way.

Peeping through the crack, the girls saw only an empty and very untidy sitting room. Becoming bolder, Doris opened the door wider and they stepped inside.

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong here," she murmured in perplexity.

Just at that moment there came another moan, louder than before. Kitty clutched her chum nervously by the arm and would have retreated from the room had not Doris held her back.

"It's coming from that bedroom," she whispered, indicating a closed door.

"Let's go back," Kitty begged.

"No, I intend to find out what that noise is."

"But some one may come up the stairs."

They listened, but heard nothing behind them.

"Do you think it could be an animal?" questioned Kitty, wide-eyed with fear, as another moan came from the room beyond.

"Hush!" warned Doris.

They took a step forward.

Another groan.

"I'm getting frightened," whispered Kitty in a voice full of distress.

"Oh, Kitty, I think—"

"What can it be, Doris?"

"Look down the stairs again!"

Kitty obeyed, stepping noiselessly backward.

"It seems all right down there," Kitty said, motioning with her hand in the direction of the floor below.

"Come!" said Doris.

Doris tiptoed across the sitting room and after a brief hesitation stooped down and peeped through the keyhole. Through the tiny aperture she looked into a barren and dismal bedroom. The curtains were drawn and at first she could distinguish little.

The weird sounds had begun again, but Doris could not decide where they came from. Kitty was tugging at her hand, trying to induce her to retreat.

"Just a minute," Doris whispered. "I can—"

With a start she broke off as she beheld a strange sight. She made out a figure stretched out on the sagging bed and her first thought was that it must be Cora and that she was in severe pain. Yet she knew this could not be, for the housekeeper was in the kitchen.

"Oh, what is it?" Kitty demanded as she heard another loud moan.

This time Doris knew that the sound had fallen from the lips of the woman lying on the bed. But was it a woman? As the figure turned slightly on the bed, Doris saw that she had been mistaken. It was a girl not more than eighteen or twenty years of age. Her face was childish, almost baby-like, but tortured with pain and suffering.

Then Doris's eyes traveled farther and she beheld the twisted body and misshapen limbs. The child was a cripple!

"Who can she be?" Doris asked herself. "And why is she hidden here?"

Instantly the answer flashed through her mind. Undoubtedly this child was the daughter of Henry and Cora Sully whom the world did not know existed. But why did they keep her secreted? Was it because they were ashamed of her or merely indifferent?

"What are you looking at?" Kitty whispered nervously. "Let me see!"

Doris moved aside to permit her chum to peep

through the keyhole. One glance was sufficient for Kitty.

"Oh, how dreadful!" she whispered. "Who can she be?"

"I thought she might be a daughter of the Sullys."

"There is a marked facial resemblance," Kitty agreed. "Do you suppose the Misses Gates know she is here?"

"Why, they must. They come up here nearly every day ostensibly to read their Bibles. They probably come to see this crippled child."

"Poor thing," Kitty murmured, "I feel so sorry for her. Dare we go in?"

"I don't see why we shouldn't. She's likely dying of lonesomeness."

Doris took hold of the door-knob but she did not turn it, for just at that moment the girls heard the sound of footsteps on the floor below. The door at the bottom of the stairs closed. The girls exchanged frightened glances. Some one was coming and they were trapped! How could they explain their presence in the suite?

Doris cast a frantic glance over the sitting room and noticed a closet.

"Quick, we must hide!" she whispered to Kitty.

They tiptoed across the room and entered the closet, softly closing the door behind them. They were not an instant too soon, for whoever was coming had reached the top of the stairway.

Daringly Doris peeped out through a crack to see who it was. To her surprise she beheld Azalea Gates. Bible in hand, the old lady entered the living room, crossed directly to the bedroom and without a glance in the direction of the closet went in and closed the door behind her.

The girls waited a few minutes to make certain that she would not return. When they heard a droning voice begin one of the Psalms, they knew they were safe.

"Now is our chance," Doris whispered.

They slipped quietly out of the closet, and stole to the door. The stairs creaked alarmingly as they went down and they were afraid they would be heard. To their relief they reached the second floor in safety. Somewhat guiltily they rushed down the hall and entered their own bedroom.

There they snatched up Wags who had grown impatient waiting for them, and fled from the house. It was a relief to reach the warm sunshine, for the sight they had just witnessed had thrown a pall over them.

"Wasn't it awful, Dory, to see a helpless cripple like that? I wonder if a doctor ever comes here," mused Kitty sadly, "to give the poor thing relief."

"We might have gone up before if the twins had only told us we could and tried to entertain the child," suggested Doris generously. "Perhaps my

singing might have eased her pain for a while, at least."

"You are a dear, Dory, always wanting to cheer up everybody with your lovely voice. But why," Kitty continued thoughtfully, "do you suppose this is kept a secret? We cannot help if the Misses Gates do not wish us to intrude on their private affairs. They may think we are dreadfully bold and presumptuous."

"We probably shouldn't have gone up there," Doris declared.

"But how did we know who was there?" Kitty returned. "We didn't know but that some one was in trouble. When we started out, we thought we were after a ghost."

"I feel as though I had seen one now," Doris said with a nervous laugh. "I do hope we don't discover any more weird things about this place.

"My! but this bright sunlight feels good and warms one up after that musty, drab third floor, with its queer noises and moanings coming from the most unexpected places. What would Mrs. Marshall say to this clutter of old furniture and bedding? I'll bet she wouldn't care to keep house for the Misses Gates," and Doris laughed as she adjusted her beret over her reddish-brown curls.

"I'm glad I'm only a visitor here," said Kitty, "and not a life inmate." She chuckled at the thought.

Down the steps came the two girls. They glanced back to see who might be listening to this conversation between them. They did not wish to be overheard by any one within the rambling old structure.

CHAPTER XIX

UNDER THE WINDOW

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UNDER THE WINDOW

"THIS mansion surely is queer, that's all I can say," Kitty declared feelingly as she and Doris, followed by Wags, walked slowly down toward the front entrance. "One minute I want to rush right away and then again I like to be here just to see what will turn up next."

"I feel the same way," Doris agreed, gazing thoughtfully down at her chum, "but I don't feel like paying five hundred dollars to see the show."

"That is a lot of money, but think what you will get eventually."

"Yes, it is a tempting proposition and I have absolute confidence in the Misses Gates."

"Then what is troubling you, Dory?"

"Oh, it seems to me Ronald Trent isn't honest and I can't understand why he is on such friendly terms with Henry Sully. Ugh! The more I see of the whole outfit the less I like them!"

"Same here! But you've practically given Ronald the money, haven't you?"

"He hasn't it yet, Kit, and the more I think about it, the more I'm inclined to change my mind."

"But it may mean losing your inheritance."

"I think I've a plan, Kit."

"What is it?"

"Well, I'll not get a bank draft at all, as Ronald suggested I do. Instead, I'll write a letter to Jake and ask him to go to the Chilton bank and get the cash for me. I'll have him bring it here to the mansion himself! Ronald can't very well protest at that, and in the meantime perhaps we can learn more about him. How does that strike you?"

"Brilliant!" Kitty approved in admiration, "but why have Jake come with the money?"

"Oh, I thought he'd like it up here, as he used to work at Rumson. And for another thing, he might be able to help us. You never can tell what may turn up."

"I agree with you!"

"Jake is a regular whiz at detecting schemes, Kit, and if anything is wrong here, he's apt to find it out in a jiffy."

"You always did have brains," Kitty said admiringly. "How do you think of things like that?"

"Well, it took me several days," Doris admitted with a laugh.

The morning passed rather slowly for the girls. They knew that Azalea was with the crippled child and Iris had gone to her room. They played several games of croquet, but it was dull sport when they were accustomed to tennis and golf. Wags

seemed less entertaining than usual and presently wandered off toward the rear of the estate.

"Where did that dog go?" Kitty asked when they had finished their game.

"Back of the house somewhere. I'll bet he's into some mischief!"

"We'd better go after him," Kitty suggested.

Dropping their croquet mallets, they leisurely made their way toward the rear of the mansion. Passing beneath the kitchen window they sniffed the appetizing odor of the cooking dinner and wished that it were time to eat. Though they disliked Cora Sully most heartily, they agreed that she was an excellent cook.

The girls had no intention of lingering by the kitchen window, but as they passed they were startled to hear a voice which they recognized as that of Henry. They would have paid no heed, but one sentence forced itself upon them.

"If only we could git rid of her!"

Involuntarily, Doris and Kitty halted and listened. They were not given to eavesdropping or to interfering in affairs which did not concern them, but the implied threat of violence assured them a sinister plot was in the brewing and they did not know but that they were destined to be the victims. What they heard next set them at rest on this score.

"If Etta was out of the way, then we could

travel on some of that money Trent promised us from the oil land," Henry muttered.

Kitty and Doris exchanged puzzled glances. Who was Etta? The question was answered for them as Cora began to talk.

"A cripple!" she complained. "What can you do tied to such a child? She's nothing but a burden, anyway. It's better if she's put out of the way."

"We'll have to be careful," Henry warned in a low voice. "Won't do to git the old ladies suspicious. And we daren't do anything rash till we git our hands on that paper."

Doris and Kitty, now convinced that the two in the kitchen were disclosing important information, crept nearer the window.

"I don't see where they keep it hid," Cora returned sullenly. "I've looked the house over from top to bottom but I can't find the paper anywhere. I know it's here somewhere, probably in one of their desks, but they keep 'em locked and I haven't been able to get the keys."

The girls heard no more, for just then Henry, evidently fearing that some one might overhear the conversation, crossed over to the window and slammed it shut. Kitty and Doris pressed their bodies up close to the house, but they were in no danger of being discovered, for the man did not glance out.

Frightened at what they had learned, the girls moved swiftly away from the window.

"What next?" Kitty murmured when they were some distance away. "Why, they're nothing but criminals! They mean to do away with that poor little crippled girl!"

"Not if we can prevent it!" Doris said grimly.

"What can we do?"

"We'll keep close watch on them. There's one thing certain. They won't attempt to harm Etta until they get that paper they spoke of."

"What do you think it can be?"

"Some kind of stock or deed, I imagine. We'll speak to the Misses Gates about it at the first opportunity. And in the meantime, we mustn't let on that we suspect anything!"

CHAPTER XX

A PICNIC

DORIS did not have an opportunity that day to speak to the Misses Gates concerning the mysterious paper which Cora and Henry Sully had mentioned, for an old friend of the ladies called at the mansion and the subject could not be brought up in her presence. The next day she fully intended to speak of the matter, but it seemed that she was never alone with the twins for ten minutes at a time. Either Cora or Henry remained within listening distance and the girls wondered if they could be suspicious.

The afternoon mail brought a note from Dave Chamberlin, and for the time being Doris and Kitty forgot the problems which troubled them.

"Dear Doris," the note read, "Marshmallow and I think tomorrow would be a great day for that picnic we planned. How about it? If we don't hear from you to the contrary, we'll be at your doorstep tomorrow morning. Don't worry about grub. We'll bring enough for an army. Dave."

"What a relief it will be to get away for a day," Kitty declared. "There's nothing to prevent our going, is there?"

"No, I heard Azalea say that Ronald was coming tomorrow but that's all the more reason for me to be away. He'll plague me about that loan and I'm not ready to give him the money yet."

"We'll not have to bother about fixing a lot of things, either," Kitty went on. "That will make the picnic more enjoyable."

"Yes, I don't mind getting things ready when I'm at home, but when you're visiting, it's different. Cora is so cross and she doesn't like to have any one step into her kitchen, let alone use it."

"Wonder where we'll go?"

"Oh, Dave probably knows some nice place. Let's go tell the Misses Gates now that we are going, and then if they should have any objection, we could let Dave know."

Azalea had gone to her room but they found Iris in the kitchen making out the market list. Upon being told of the plan she at once approved of it.

"I have never met this young man you call Marshmallow," she smiled, "but if he is at all like your friend David I am sure I would approve of him. By all means have your picnic, and Cora will make you something nice to take with you."

"We don't like to trouble you," Doris murmured.

"It will be no trouble at all," Iris assured her. "I wouldn't think of letting you go without a well-filled basket. Cora, you might make one of your pineapple cakes."

"We're out of eggs," the housekeeper said crossly without glancing up from the pan of potatoes which she was peeling.

"Then I'll add two dozen to the market list," Iris said. "What else will you want? Pickles and olives, of course. And sandwiches. When I was young, a picnic just wasn't a picnic without plenty to eat."

"I'm sure we'll have enough," Doris laughed. "Marshmallow's mother is a wonderful cook and he always brings enough for six."

True to their word, Dave and Marshmallow drove up to the mansion gate the next morning shortly after ten o'clock.

"We'd have been here sooner but Marshmallow had so much food to pack, you know," Dave told the girls as he helped them into the car.

It was an ideal day for a picnic, bright but not too warm. Doris and Kitty were relieved that the sky was clear, for the memory of the storm which had nearly overtaken them on their last picnic was still vivid.

"Where are we going?" Doris asked.

"Oh, there's a place not far from here called Eagle's Point. I though we might try that."

"Sounds interesting," Kitty declared.

A short drive west of the town brought them to a winding and heavily wooded road. Following this they climbed a steep hill and came to a halt at

the brow of a cliff. Parking the car they climbed out and walked over to the edge of the precipice and looked down upon a lake, crystal clear and as blue as the sky it reflected. Only a short distance from the road a stone fireplace had been built and picnic tables had been provided. A spring provided clear, cold water.

The girls were delighted at the spot and announced they would look no farther for a picnic place. Dave and Marshmallow locked the car and carried the heavy lunch hampers to the tables. Marshmallow began to unpack the dishes but Doris and Kitty stopped him.

"You don't want to eat yet," they protested.

"Why not?" he drawled goodnaturedly. "That's what we came for, wasn't it?"

"But we want to explore first," Doris declared. "There's lovely scenery, and then we must work up an appetite for luncheon."

"Mine is already working," Marshmallow grinned.

However, he placed the dishes back in the hamper and started out with the others, managing to pair himself with Kitty, which was not difficult, as Doris and Dave were absorbed in each other.

A steep path led down to the lake, and this the party decided to explore. Slipping and sliding, they finally reached the bottom of the decline without mishap. There, finding a boat tied to an

old log, they decided it would be good sport to go for a ride on the lake.

"There aren't any oars," Doris observed in disappointment.

"We don't need 'em," Marshmallow declared, picking up a board. "This will do almost as well."

By hunting around they found another board nearly the same size, and with Dave and Marshmallow each wielding one of the improvised oars, they courageously set out in the little boat. The paddles were not very effective and the young men worked like Trojans to propel the craft a few yards. For the most part they were content to drift with the wind.

Tiring of this sport, they brought the boat to shore and left it tied to the log.

The party was about to climb the hill again when Doris noticed a path leading around the lake. She proposed that they continue their trip of exploration, and the suggestion was greeted with enthusiasm.

The four were forced to proceed single file, for the path was narrow and branches of low-hanging trees formed an archway above their heads. Presently, Doris who was in the lead stopped short and gave an exclamation of surprise.

"What's the matter?" Kitty demanded.

"We've come to the jumping off place! And just see what I've discovered. A cave!"

Kitty thought her chum was only joking, but as she came up behind her she saw for herself the tiny opening in the side of the cliff. Dave and Marshmallow crowded up, the latter becoming greatly excited.

"Jumping snakes!" he exclaimed. "I never heard about this cave. I wonder what's inside?"

He thrust his head in at the opening but could see nothing, as his eyes were unaccustomed to the darkness.

"If we only had a flashlight!" he declared. "It would be fun to explore it."

"Maybe it's inhabited by bears," Kitty suggested nervously.

"Never heard of any around here," Marshmallow insisted. "Say, we can't go home without seeing the inside."

"I think there's a flashlight in the car," Dave told him. "I'll see."

The girls and Marshmallow waited impatiently for Dave to return. Presently, he came back with the flashlight.

"Wouldn't it be grand if we'd find buried treasure?" Doris laughed. "I could use some money all right, and I don't know of any more delightful way to obtain it."

She did not really hope that any such adventure would befall them, but Kitty's eyes grew round at the mere mention of treasure.

"Who's to go first?" Doris asked.

"Let me," Marshmallow begged.

Dave handed him the flashlight, and after an instant's hesitation he again thrust his head and shoulders through the opening. It was only a small aperture, and Marshmallow grunted as he squeezed through.

"You're too fat," Doris called after him. "You may never get out again."

There was no response from the inside of the cave and Kitty, suddenly becoming alarmed, called anxiously:

"Marshmallow! Marshmallow!"

"I'm right here," came a muffled voice. "Come on in."

"What do you see?" Doris demanded.

"It looks like a cracking big cave."

Somewhat reassured, the girls wormed their way through the opening and Dave brought up the rear. It was pitch dark inside, but the beam of Marshmallow's light furnished a faint illumination.

"Follow me," Marshmallow commanded.

He led the way deeper into the cavern. The cave consisted of two chambers, and as the four friends entered the second room Marshmallow flashed his light over the ceiling. They saw strange formations resembling icicles hanging from above.

"Stalactites!" Doris exclaimed.

"Aren't they odd?" Kitty cried. "What causes them anyway?"

"I've read that stalactites are caused by the dripping of water which contains carbonate of lime," Doris explained.

"Folks, I guess we've seen all the sights," Marshmallow, who had gone on a short way ahead, announced. "It isn't as large a cave as I thought."

"No buried treasure, either," Kitty murmured in disappointment. "Still, the stalactites are interesting. Imagine living this close and not knowing anything about them."

It was cold inside the cave and, being without wraps, the girls began to shiver.

"Let's go," Doris proposed.

Once outside the warm sunshine seemed more welcome than before. During the excursion into the cave, Dave had appeared less interested than the others, and now, observing the smile on his face, Doris's suspicions were aroused.

"Dave Chamberlin!" she accused. "You knew about that cave all the time!"

"Well, maybe I had heard about it," he grinned, "but I didn't want to spoil the fun."

"We were all so excited and silly," Doris laughed. "There's a path leading right up here! And we didn't think a thing about it. Of course other folks know about the cave."

"Oh, well, it was fun anyway," Marshmallow

said. "So much exertion made me hungry, though. When do we eat?"

"You would ask *that*," Doris bantered. "I'm willing if the rest of you are."

The climb back up the steep hill was not easy, and by the time Doris and Kitty reached the top they were nearly out of breath. While they were resting under a shade tree, Dave and Marshmallow brought water from the spring and started a fire.

"What are we cooking?" Doris asked with interest.

"Steak," Marshmallow told her, smacking his lips. "And boy, do I know how to cook it!"

"Your mother must have been giving you lessons," Doris smiled.

"Say, don't you think I ever went camping? I can cook a lot of things." He opened a hamper and began to lift out various covered dishes. "Just look at all this stuff Ma sent."

While the steak was sizzling over the red hot fire, the girls spread the table cloth and unwrapped the various packages. They were appalled at the outlay of food. "Enough for an army!" Doris groaned. Always an excellent cook, Mrs. Mallow had quite outdone herself on this occasion. Salads crisp and inviting in nests of lettuce, pie, gigantic cream puffs with Marshmallow's favorite chocolate filling, baked beans, deviled eggs and lemonade

were but a suggestion of all the good things with which the cloth was loaded.

"We'll never be able to eat all of this," Doris declared in dismay.

"Sure we will," Marshmallow grinned. "Just give me a chance."

The others were forced to admit that he did do remarkably well, for long after they had finished eating he continued to blissfully gorge sandwiches, cake and cream puffs with an apparently unappeased appetite. At last, however, the plump lad was forced to acknowledge his Waterloo.

"I'm afraid I can't finish it," he said regretfully. "What a shame to lug so much back with us."

"Maybe you'll feel up to it after you've rested a bit," Dave suggested.

"That's an idea!"

With a contented groan he stretched himself out under a shade tree and closed his eyes. Dave helped the girls clean up the picnic things.

After that, they sat around and talked. Doris was induced to sing and they all joined in, even Marshmallow, whose voice was gruff and seldom on the right key.

"It's that last sandwich pressing against my larynx," he apologized.

"Doris, you have a wonderful voice," Dave praised soberly. "I suppose you've been told that by every one."

"Not by every one," Doris laughed. "It will probably take years before my voice develops to its fullest capacity. That's what my teacher says."

"You're dead set upon a career, aren't you?" Dave asked, a strange light shining in his eyes as he gazed thoughtfully at her curly head.

"Oh, yes. I want to sing in Grand Opera some day. Perhaps my ambitions are greater than my ability!"

"No, you'll make it, and if that's what you want, more power to you!"

Doris glanced quickly at her friend, and as quickly turned away as she saw the expression on his face. She was further embarrassed as she realized that Marshmallow and Kitty were aware of what had been passing through Dave's mind.

Hastily she arose.

"Don't you think we'd better be starting back? Dave and Marshmallow have a long drive ahead of them and it's getting late."

"We haven't eaten all of the sandwiches yet," Marshmallow protested.

"Then hurry and we'll wait for you."

"But I can't now. Oh, well, I suppose we can cart them home. Maybe Dave and I can eat them on the way back to Chilton."

"You mean *you* can," Dave corrected.

As they were driving slowly back toward the

mansion, Doris thought of Ronald Trent, and frowned. For the last few hours she had been having so much fun that she had not once considered the problem which troubled her, but now she decided to mention the matter to Dave. Perhaps he could offer helpful advice. Accordingly, she told him of the proposition which the Misses Gates had made.

Dave listened quietly until she had finished.

"It may be all right," he said, "but it sounds sort of queer to me. I don't like that fellow Trent."

"He's my cousin, Dave."

"Better not own him!"

"Well, I haven't exactly," Doris admitted. "It's hard to believe he really is a relative of mine."

"I suppose he'll be at the mansion when we get back," Kitty sighed.

"And he'll want his answer about the loan. Oh, dear, I don't know what to do. I think I'll have Jake bring it to the mansion."

"Not a bad idea," Dave approved.

"And I'll come along to chaperone him," Marshmallow interposed. "He wouldn't know what to do with so many ladies. He'll need me to help him handle the situation masterfully."

"Do come," Doris urged.

"Just leave it to me," ejaculated Marshmallow, throwing out his chest manfully, and displaying the

cords of muscles in his upper arm, rolling up his sleeve playfully. "How's that?"

"Say, Marshmallow, you've got a good opinion of yourself, haven't you? Especially after eating all those sandwiches. My, but wouldn't I hate to get into a fight with you!" and Dave jokingly jostled him as though to test his skill as a fighter.

"Lay off me, Dave! Who do you think I am, Jack Dempsey?" So saying, Marshmallow pretended to be very much frightened.

"Only a friendly fight, old boy. But anyway, girls, you see you have two champions who will stand by you to the death, to the bitter end, if need be, 'til death us do part.'" And with that closing bit of assurance they struck an attitude of utter devotion, entwining their arms about each other.

"You silly boys," giggled Kitty, "perhaps we will need you, so keep in fighting trim until such a time might arise."

"At your service, fair ladies," said Marshmallow solemnly, taking off his hat, and making a sweeping bow before them.

"Jake can be your second," suggested Doris.

And so it was arranged in regard to bringing the much-desired loan.

Dave and Marshmallow left the girls at the mansion gate, but as it was growing late declined an invitation to go inside. Doris and Kitty

watched them drive away and then reluctantly walked up the path toward the house.

"Ronald's car isn't here," Doris observed in relief, "so if he came today, he must have left before we returned. At least I won't be bothered about that loan until tomorrow, and I can give him a definite answer then."

Kitty agreed with her friend that there was no further need of troubling their minds about Ronald Trent and the loan, at least not tonight, so they slowly sauntered up the pathway toward the old mansion.

CHAPTER XXI

AN UNUSUAL PROCEDURE

"I DON'T like to speak of it, but Ronald will be here directly after breakfast and I am afraid he expects a definite answer about the loan. We dislike to rush you but the dear boy is so impatient and—"

Azalea allowed her words to trail off and smiled apologetically at Doris, who sat opposite her at the breakfast table. Iris looked down at her plate to hide her embarrassment. Both ladies were very proud and found it difficult to bring up the subject of money.

"If only we had something of our own that we could sell, we wouldn't think of asking you for this favor," Iris murmured.

Doris had been awaiting an opportunity to bring up the subject of the paper which Cora and Henry Sully had mentioned. The housekeeper had returned to the kitchen and she decided to risk being overheard.

"Of course you don't want to mortgage your house," she declared. "What a pity you haven't any land or stock of any kind."

Azalea laughed.

"As it happens, we have some oil company bonds but they aren't worth anything. Iris and I were very gullible to buy them. Millions have been lost in the oil fields but we didn't realize it until too late."

"Oil bonds, did you say?" Doris demanded eagerly.

Iris nodded.

"Yes, we lost several thousand dollars."

"And you still have the certificates?"

Iris did not reply, for just at that moment Cora Sully appeared to remove the dishes and the Misses Gates made it a point never to discuss personal affairs or business before their servants. Upon leaving the dining room Doris started to bring up the subject again but before she could do so, Ronald Trent was announced.

He appeared less affable than usual and lost no time in bringing up the matter of the loan. The Misses Gates looked doubtfully at Doris.

"I have already sent for the money," she told them. "It should be here tomorrow or the next day."

"Sent?" Ronald asked blankly. "You didn't get the bank draft the way I told you to?"

"Why, no," Doris returned innocently. "I thought it would be so much easier to have Jake bring the money."

"And who is Jake?" the man questioned suspiciously.

"Oh, he works for my uncle."

Ronald Trent seemed to relax at this, but it was evident to both Kitty and Doris that he was far from pleased at the way the matter had been handled.

"Well, all right," he said grumpily, "but he'd better get here with the money tomorrow."

"Why Ronald!" Azalea reproved gently. "I think it's lovely of Doris to offer her money, and we mustn't seem ungrateful."

"Humph! It's just a straight business deal. She knows she'll get every cent of it back and with interest! Come on, if you're going with me! I can't wait around much longer!"

Azalea and Iris looked a trifle crushed at this abrupt statement, but they hurried away to get their coats and hats.

"We must leave you alone for awhile," Azalea said apologetically to the girls. "We have a little business to attend to at the bank."

"Come on, let's get going!" Ronald urged. In the doorway he turned back toward Doris. "Don't fail to let that fellow Jake know he's to bring the money tomorrow. Understand?"

"I think so," Doris returned dryly.

After the three had left the mansion, she and Kitty took stock of affairs. They were amazed that the Misses Gates had gone with Ronald, for it was only on very rare occasions that they ever set

foot beyond the high hedge which surrounded Locked Gates.

"They're under that man's influence entirely," Kitty declared.

Doris nodded soberly.

"And he's getting more sure of himself every minute. Why, he spoke positively mean to them."

"I wonder why they went to the bank?"

"Most likely to give him more money, though from what they said, I'm sure they're practically destitute. Oh, it's a shame!"

"What can we do, Doris?"

"I don't know, but I have a feeling things are about to reach a climax. Let's go for a walk and perhaps we can think of some way to show Ronald up in his true light."

As the girls went to their room for their hats, they met Cora and Henry just starting up the stairway with broom, dustpan and mop. Since it was an unusual sight to see the two working together unless the Misses Gates were at hand to watch them, Kitty and Doris could not hide their surprise.

"Thought we'd do some housecleanin'," Cora murmured, though the girls had asked for no explanation. "Thinkin' of going out, were you?"

"Why, yes," Doris replied. "We're going for a walk."

They found their hats and left the house. How-

ever, they had walked but a short distance when Doris stopped short.

"Kit, I have an idea!"

"Spill it!"

"We'll never have a better opportunity than this to visit that little crippled girl on the attic floor. The twins are away and the Sullys are cleaning the wing on the other side of the house."

"Do we dare?"

"Why not? After all, it's no crime to visit a little girl. I feel dreadfully sorry for her, and then I'd like to ask her a few questions, too."

"All right," Kitty agreed.

Returning to the mansion, they quietly entered by the side door and stole softly up the stairway. They could hear Henry and Cora cleaning the rooms occupied by the Misses Gates. The doors were closed so they knew they had not been seen. Turning into their own wing they moved noiselessly down the hall until they came to the stairway leading to the third floor. Glancing back to make certain they were not being observed, they crept up the stairs and paused before the Sully suite.

Hesitating an instant, they pushed open the door and stepped into the sitting room. As they moved over toward the bedroom, they heard some one crying and knew that it was Etta.

Doris and Kitty quietly opened the door and en-

tered. At first the girl on the bed did not hear them, but as they took a step toward her, she turned her head.

The girls were shocked at her appearance. She was not an ugly child, but her face was pinched and drawn. The hands which rested above the soiled comforter were thin and scrawny. Her hair did not look as though it had been combed that day.

The girls did not know just what to do or say, so stunned were they upon seeing this strange little creature gazing so pitifully and wonderingly at them. She was not frightened, but she was very much amazed. Why, these girls were among the few persons she had seen in all her years of seclusion.

Her great eyes looked out upon them—pleading, tragic, wounded eyes, like those of a timid, shy young animal. The girls held their breath!

"I never expected this," awesomely whispered Kitty.

"How dreadful!" responded Doris.

A hush fell over the two young girls.

The old mansion itself furnished the background and what a melodramatic setting! The mighty Locked Gates, surrounded by the weird trees that sighed and moaned in the night as they swayed and tossed restlessly as though exhausted from their unceasing vigil!

The vivacious chums from Barry Manor were

suddenly confronted with a side of life which they were unable to understand. Could this child be the neglected daughter of Cora and Henry Sully?

As Kitty and Doris advanced to the bedside, Etta stared at them in astonishment. Shut up in one room for nearly twenty years she had never seen any one her own age. Only Azalea and Iris had ever visited her and so she had come to think of a world peopled only by adults. Her parents, Henry and Cora Sully, had never taken the trouble to educate her and the only lessons she had ever received were taken from the Bible passages which the Misses Gates read aloud. Though in actual age she was older than either Doris or Kitty, mentally she remained a child. Now, as she viewed the girls and noticed their white dresses, it seemed to her that surely she must be gazing upon two angels.

Too moved for words, an expression of awe and rapture came over her face; she stretched out her thin hand toward Doris.

The two girls took a step nearer toward the bed. The coverlet of the quaint patch-work pattern was faded from many washings and the muslin was yellowed. A twisted, knotted handkerchief had dropped carelessly on a narrow strip of well-worn rag carpet. The whole picture was a far cry from anything that the two girls from boarding school had ever seen or expected to find at Locked Gates.

The poor, unfortunate girl was gowned in an old-fashioned, high-necked night-dress. A bit of yellowed crocheting finished the neck-line, no doubt the work of her grandmother, the dressmaker, who had been the seamstress for the Gates family.

"How do you do?" said Doris, smiling sweetly in an effort to be friendly at once.

"We are visiting here," added Kitty, also making an effort to be cheerful and to put the cripple at ease with her most charming manner.

"It is a lovely sunny day, my dear. Let me raise the shade so that the light can come in and cheer up the room." Doris raised the curtain which crinkled and creaked as the sunlight streamed into the bedroom in the attic.

"Now you can see the fleecy clouds," chirped Doris, "and pretend you are floating and resting, honey, on one of those billowy boats up there in that deep, blue sea."

Kitty laughed in a silvery, tinkling tone.

"I believe we could almost see Barry Manor today, the air is so clear and there is no sign of haze or fog to obstruct one's view. I should have brought my field-glasses with me, Dory, and then we could see our Alma Mater, maybe!"

Doris could not restrain a laugh, so impossible did it appear to her that one could see miles and miles, even though the air were clear as crystal.

A smile, a bit wavering and uncertain, flickered

about the crippled girl's mouth, as she listened to these two young girls, dressed in white, smiling happily, and the sunlight touching their hair with gold.

"Won't you talk to us, dear?" asked Kitty, moving closer toward the bedside.

"Yes, dearie," urged Doris. "Tell us about yourself. We want to be your friends, and we want to make you happy."

"You must be an angel," she whispered in a tense voice. "Can you make me well? Can you give me new limbs?"

Gently Doris stroked the little hand and pushed the tangled hair from her face.

"We aren't angels," she said kindly. "We're just girls and very human ones at that."

"Girls?" Etta echoed blankly.

The word had no significance to her. All her life she had been shut away having been associated entirely with her parents and the Misses Gates. Her bed was not even by the window. Consequently, she had never been able to look down upon the street where children played.

"Don't you get lonesome here all by yourself?" Doris asked the girl.

Etta nodded.

"Sometimes it seems as though I can't stand it."

"Perhaps we can arrange to take you downstairs some afternoon," suggested Kitty hopefully.

"But I cannot walk!" Tears came into the sad eyes of Etta.

"Oh, don't cry, dearie," soothed Doris. "We easily could manage to take you down."

"It would be fun, Etta."

"And we have the cutest little dog we found. We call him Wags because he is so good-natured and wags his tail so much."

Etta's tears were gone, almost instantly, as this new world of cheer was opened to her by the girls.

"We'll be your guardian angels. Would you be willing to have us come and help while away the lonesome hours?"

There was no time for further questions, for suddenly Doris and Kitty heard footsteps on the stairway.

Some one was coming!

"We'll be caught!" Kitty whispered, starting quickly toward the door.

Doris caught her by the hand.

"We can't make it! We must hide!"

Frantically, the girls looked about the room. They felt that they were trapped.

"The closet," Doris hissed.

As they moved on tiptoe toward it, Etta held out her hands toward them.

"Don't go away," she begged, almost tearfully.

"Sh!" Doris warned. "Just be patient and your 'angels' will come back to see you again."

With that she closed the door of the closet and the two girls crouched against the wall.

"She'll be almost certain to give us away," Kitty whispered fearfully. "What a mess we're in now! Fancy trying to explain our way out of it!"

CHAPTER XXII

A NARROW ESCAPE

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A NARROW ESCAPE

SCARCELY daring to breathe naturally lest they be discovered, Doris and Kitty crouched in the dark closet. In their haste to hide they had left the door a trifle ajar and though this added to the risk of being detected, it was too late to close it tightly.

Already they could hear some one in the outer sitting room and a moment later the bedroom door was thrown open. Henry Sully came in. He seemed strangely excited and was out of breath from hurrying up the stairs so rapidly.

Peeping out through the crack of the door, the girls saw that he was carrying two long, fat envelopes in his hand.

Rushing across the room, with scarcely a glance directed at Etta, Henry pulled a heavy suitcase from under the bed. Opening it, he placed the two envelopes carefully in the bottom and folded clothing over them.

"Thought we never would find 'em," the girls heard him mutter.

As he bent over to fasten the suitcase again, Etta plucked at his coat sleeve to attract his attention.

"Father," she murmured, "I just saw two beautiful angels. They came here to see me."

Inside the closet, Kitty and Doris gripped each others' hands nervously. They feared that Etta was about to expose them. What Henry would do if he found them hiding there, they dared not think.

However, the man paid scant attention to what the crippled girl was saying. Impatiently he jerked away from her.

"Stop that silly prattling," he commanded. "I'm sick of it!"

The girls were shocked at this cruel speech, but what followed left them even more stunned.

"You might as well know it now as later," Henry told Etta viciously. "We're tired of looking after you night and day. All you're good for is to eat and make up fancy fairy tales about angels and the like. This is a hard world and it's time you learned its ways. Cora and I are going to git out of here pretty soon and, when we do, you can shift for yourself!"

Etta stared at her father as though unable to comprehend what he had said. Then as it slowly dawned upon her that she was to be left to a cruel fate, a shudder convulsed her body. With a frightened cry, she caught Henry by the arm.

"Oh, don't leave me alone," she begged piteously. "Don't leave me to die!"

"Let go!" Henry snarled, pushing her back upon the bed as she endeavored to sit up. "I tell you we're through with you and it won't do any good to be squawking about it!"

Shoving the suitcase under the bed with his foot, he turned toward the door. Etta stretched out her thin little arms and entreated him to come back. Henry laughed harshly and slammed the door shut.

Etta became almost hysterical in her grief. She wailed and sobbed and beat upon the pillow with her puny fists, but, if Henry heard, he was not in the least affected. Doris and Kitty could hear him hurrying down the stairs to the second floor.

Satisfied that the coast was clear, they quickly came out of their hiding place. Filled with compassion for Etta, they rushed to her bedside. As the girl saw them, she tried to stifle her sobs.

"There, dear," Doris tried to comfort her, "don't cry. We'll see that no harm comes to you."

"You won't let my father go away and leave me?"

"Not unless you want him to," Doris assured her gently. Under her breath she said to Kitty: "It would almost be better for her if he did leave."

"She couldn't have any worse care," Kitty agreed.

As soon as they had quieted Etta and had made her more comfortable against the pillows, the girls

cast an appraising glance about the room. The scene which they had just witnessed made them wonder anew what mischief Henry and Cora Sully were plotting.

"They *are* planning to get away from here," Doris said to her chum in a low voice. "That suitcase under the bed was packed."

"And everything has been taken from the closet," Kitty added. "There's Cora's suitcase back of that couch."

"It's packed, too. That means they intend to leave soon. Kitty, we'll have to keep our wits about us now. And the first thing to do is to get away from this room, before we're caught."

The girls had talked so rapidly and in such a low tone that Etta had not heard them, but now as she sensed that they were about to leave, she began to sob again. Doris dropped down on the bed and took her hand.

"You mustn't cry," she declared. "We're only going away for a little while."

"You'll come back tomorrow?"

"Yes, and you must be careful not to say anything about having seen us. If you do, we may not be able to come."

"I won't tell," Etta promised solemnly.

Hastily saying goodbye, the girls slipped out of the bedroom and down the stairs to the second floor. As they entered their own room they could

hear Cora and Henry Sully moving about on the floor below.

"They certainly finished their housecleaning quickly enough," Kitty observed.

Doris took care to close the door and then, dropping down on the bed beside her chum, regarded her soberly.

"It's my candid opinion that was only an excuse, Kit. It wouldn't surprise me if they were hunting for something in the Misses Gates's rooms."

"But what?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Say! You don't suppose it could have been those two envelopes he put in his suitcase?"

"It might have been."

"Why didn't we look in the suitcase when we were there? If Cora and Henry are stealing, we ought to know it!"

"We wouldn't have discovered much if we had looked," Kitty declared. "I noticed those envelopes were sealed."

"Yes, that's so. We really haven't any excuse for opening sealed envelopes. If we did, it would be just our luck that whatever it was belonged to Henry after all."

"He was up to some mischief today, Dory. You remember how guilty he looked when we met him on the stairs. And he's the laziest man alive. It

isn't likely he'd start out to clean house unless he had been told to do it."

"No, he was hunting for something, all right. I wonder if it could have been—"

She did not finish, for Kitty caught her by the hand and dragged her from the bed.

"The ruby ring!" she exclaimed. "Maybe that was what they were after!"

Anxiously she felt under the mattress and when her hand failed to touch the box, began to paw frantically at the blankets to get them out of the way.

"Here, don't tear that bed to pieces," Doris scolded. "Let me find the ring."

She ran her hand under the mattress and to Kitty's intense relief, brought forth the tiny box.

"I wish the Misses Gates had taken their ring," she sighed. "I've lost five pounds since we started looking after it."

"The ring is the least of my troubles just now," Doris told her. "I'm convinced that Henry and Cora are involved in a plot against the Misses Gates, but just what it is I haven't been able to fathom."

"Hadn't we better tell the ladies everything?"

"We're in rather a delicate position, Kit. The Sullys are trusted servants and Azalea and Iris might believe them before they would us."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"Let's keep close watch of Cora and Henry and wait for them to show their hand. If they try to get away, we can expose them, and then if they're caught red-handed, the Gates sisters will have to believe us."

"That's probably the best way," Kitty agreed.

Replacing the ring under the mattress, they went downstairs. They were just in time to see Ronald Trent driving away from the mansion after depositing the old ladies at their door.

Entering the living room, Azalea and Iris sank down into the nearest chairs without bothering to remove their hats. They appeared agitated and exhausted but offered no explanation for their condition. Doris and Kitty guessed that Ronald had wheedled money from them and perhaps had abused them for not giving him more.

"Ronald is coming back tomorrow," Iris said presently, speaking to Doris. "You are quite sure your messenger will be here with the money?"

"Why, yes, I feel sure Jake will come. I sent word several days ago."

"I am so glad," Iris murmured in relief. "Ronald is leaving tomorrow and we must have the money ready for him or lose the inheritance."

"I see," murmured Doris thoughtfully.

"We probably won't have his company much longer, then," surmised Kitty, winking coyly at Doris.

Azalea stroked her forehead as if perplexed and perhaps a bit worried.

"I never dreamed that money need cause us such concern. We cannot afford to lose this inheritance now. I have so much faith in the son of John Trent. I want him to go away happy and satisfied that we have not failed him."

Doris pricked up her ears at this bit of information. So Ronald was leaving, too! It seemed that affairs certainly were destined to come to a climax on the following day. How glad she was that she had asked Jake to come. If only he did not fail her!

CHAPTER XXIII

AN ACCUSATION

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AN ACCUSATION

ON the following morning Doris and Kitty arose earlier than usual. They wandered about the grounds until time for breakfast, but when they were called to the dining room by Cora, the Misses Gates had not put in their appearance.

"You may as well sit down," the housekeeper told them. "Things are getting cold and I'm in a hurry to get around this morning."

"Really, we'd prefer to wait," Doris told her. "It's so unusual for the Misses Gates to be late. We're usually the guilty ones."

They were about to go outside again when they heard some one coming down the stairs. It was Azalea and the girls saw at once that she was dreadfully agitated. Iris came after her and she, too, was excited.

"Some one has been tampering with our things!" Azalea cried. "We have separate desks in our rooms. A few minutes ago when I went to get a check book from the pigeon hole, I found that everything had been rifled!"

"My desk is the same way," Iris declared angrily.

"Was anything taken?" Doris questioned quietly.

"Yes, several important papers."

Doris and Kitty, not greatly surprised at this news, glanced significantly at each other. The twins, observing them, regarded the girls rather sharply.

"Was any one here yesterday while we were gone?" Azalea questioned Cora who had remained in the room.

"No, ma'am. There wasn't any one in that wing all day—except of course the young ladies."

"What do you mean?" Doris demanded. "We never set foot in that part of the house."

The housekeeper merely stared at them in feigned astonishment and shrugged her shoulders.

"I can't understand who would want the papers," Iris said quietly, but she looked queerly at Doris and Kitty. "Of course, the bonds may be more valuable than we thought."

"In all the time I've been at the mansion nothing like this ever happened," Cora murmured.

Kitty and Doris cast irritated glances at the housekeeper. They realized all too well that she was trying to build up an alibi for herself by calling attention to her past service.

"Perhaps it would clear up matters if you girls would tell the housekeeper what you were doing yesterday," Azalea suggested in her gentle voice.

"Why—we weren't doing much—of anything," Kitty stammered.

The question embarrassed her. She could not very well tell the Misses Gates that she and Doris had taken it into their heads to explore every nook and cranny of the old mansion. It would appear to the ladies that they had abused their hospitality.

"We were in our room part of the time," Doris said.

"And where were you the rest of it?" Cora demanded harshly.

"We weren't in the left wing at any rate!" Doris retorted, with growing indignation.

Azalea and Iris, greatly disturbed, looked uncertainly from one to the other. They did not know what to say or how to handle the difficult situation.

"I'll call Henry in," Cora announced. "He can tell you where these girls were yesterday!"

She stepped to the door and called to her husband who was in the garden. He came readily and, as the girls had expected, corroborated Cora's story.

"Right after you ladies went to the bank they said they were going for a walk," he told the twins. "They started out but as soon as they thought they had thrown us off the track they stole back into the house. My wife and I heard them go into the left wing and knowin' they had no business there we sort of listened. They went into your room, Miss Azalea, and closed the door. Later we heard 'em in the room adjoining."

"Can this be true?" Azalea asked the girls, her voice trembling with suppressed emotion.

"No, of course it isn't," Doris returned.

"What isn't true?" a loud voice demanded, and they all turned to see Ronald Trent standing in the doorway.

To the embarrassment of the girls he was quickly told of the accusation against them. They knew they could expect no help from him.

"There, there," he said, masterfully throwing an arm around the shoulders of each of the ladies. "Don't take on so about it. I'll straighten this matter out in a minute for you. Just leave everything to me."

"Oh, Ronald," Iris murmured gratefully.

"We're in such a muddle," Azalea added, "and we don't want to falsely accuse any one."

"Of course not. Just let me handle this in my own way. Now, Cora and Henry are old servants, aren't they?"

"Cora is the daughter of our former dressmaker," Azalea explained. "She and her husband have been with us several years now."

"Years! And how long have you known Doris Force and her friend?"

"Why, we never met them until a few days ago," Iris answered reluctantly.

Ronald nodded in grim satisfaction.

"There you are!"

"You accuse your own cousin—" Iris began, but Ronald interrupted her.

"Yes, my first duty is to you and to Miss Azalea. I will not protect my own relatives at your expense!"

Goaded beyond endurance, Doris faced Ronald Trent defiantly.

"Call me no cousin of yours!" she cried. "I believe you're nothing but a bluff!"

The man's face went white with anger and for an instant Doris thought he meant to strike her. Instead he laughed harshly.

"Don't say such things!" Azalea commanded sternly. "Ronald is the son of our dear friend, John Trent."

"Let him prove it," Doris cried.

"Young lady," Ronald told her angrily. "The burden of proof is upon you. Prove that you didn't take those papers!"

"All right, I will!" Doris announced with sudden decision. "I'll tell you where the papers are!"

At her words, Cora and Henry Sully recoiled a step, but the Misses Gates did not observe their guilty action.

"Tell us!" Azalea commanded.

"Yes," Ronald echoed, but with less force. "Spin your fairy tale."

Doris faced the three conspirators defiantly. She pointed an accusing finger at Henry.

"The papers are in his suitcase!"

"You lie!" Henry snarled.

"It's the truth and you know it," Kitty confirmed. "We can prove it!"

"How do you know the papers are in Henry's suitcase?" Iris questioned doubtfully.

"Because we saw them there yesterday," Doris declared.

"Ah, then you admit you were snooping around?" Ronald demanded triumphantly.

"We weren't snooping," Doris retorted indignantly. "We had a very good reason for going to the Sullys' suite, and as it turns out, it was fortunate for the Misses Gates that we did."

"You went to the Sully suite yesterday?" Azalea gasped.

"Yes, we heard Etta crying and sobbing. We didn't know what was wrong—"

"You saw Etta?" Iris asked.

She dropped weakly into a chair and for a moment looked as though she might faint.

"We thought no one in the world knew about her," she said very low. "For her sake we have kept Cora and Henry here during all these years. What will the neighbors think if they learn it?"

"They shall never hear it from us," Doris replied, "but we are unwilling to permit the Sullys to desert her."

"You're crazy!" Henry shouted. "We wouldn't think of leaving her!"

"Then why are your suitcases packed?" Doris demanded.

Henry could not answer, and Ronald, seeing that the man was throwing suspicion upon himself, stepped again into the breach.

"All this talk is getting us nowhere," he said. "Obviously, the girls took the papers from the desks and are only trying to save themselves." He turned to the Misses Gates and a false note came into his voice. "Of course, I realize that you ladies regret this exceedingly and no doubt feel sorry for them. Under the circumstances I suggest that the matter be dropped without placing charges against them."

"The matter will not be dropped!" Doris cried. "We'll sift it to the bottom right now."

"And the easiest way is to look in Henry's suitcase," Kitty added. "You'll find the papers there!"

A less clever man than Ronald Trent would have lost his temper, for well he knew that he was treading upon dangerous ground. Realizing that the Misses Gates would judge him as much by his manner as by his words, he faced the girls with the calm and dignity of a judge.

"You are only trying to shield yourselves," he told them sternly. "Your entire story has been a series of lies!"

"Stop!" cried Doris, throwing back her lovely head and looking her accuser straight in the eye. Kitty thought never had she seen her chum quite so beautiful, so courageously poised for one so inexperienced.

"I speak the truth!"

CHAPTER XXIV

FACE TO FACE

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FACE TO FACE

"I SPEAK the truth," Doris insisted indignantly, "and furthermore, Ronald Trent, I am convinced that you are nothing but an impostor. You are plotting with Henry and Cora Sully to swindle these people out of everything!"

"Doris!" Iris remonstrated.

"She's lost her mind!" Cora exclaimed.

Thoroughly aroused at the false accusations made against herself and her chum, Doris could not have remained quiet had she wished. However, she forced herself to speak calmly.

"You shall not have a cent of my money when Jake arrives with it," she told Ronald.

"We shall see," he returned, glaring back at her. "You have already lent the money to the Misses Gates and they have promised it to me. Haven't you?"

Azalea and Iris, pale with excitement, nodded their heads miserably.

"We've given you nearly every cent we have of our own," Iris admitted, "and we did promise you Doris's money. We trusted you—and now these dreadful accusations."

"What can you expect when you bring strangers into the house?"

"But we needed Doris's help so much, Ronald," Azalea protested, "and she isn't the same as a stranger."

"You are willing to accept her word against mine?"

"Oh, Ronald, please don't take that attitude," Iris pleaded. "We want to believe you both, but surely something is wrong."

Ronald laughed shortly.

"I told you once I'd straighten out everything. Just send these intruders on their way."

Azalea and Iris exchanged uneasy glances. They did not know what to do. For the sake of John Trent, the man they loved, they felt they could not be disloyal to his son, and yet they were reluctant to ask Doris and Kitty to leave, particularly as they had been given a special invitation to visit their home. The girls had told a very straightforward story, but on the other hand Cora and Henry were old servants.

"I don't know what to do," Iris murmured.

"There's only one thing to do and that's to send these girls packing," Ronald told her firmly. "Let me handle this for you."

"But we want those important papers back," Azalea protested. "Tell us where they are."

"How should I know?" Ronald demanded

harshly. "These girls have probably hid them somewhere!"

"You know that isn't true!" Doris snapped. "We've told you where you'll find the papers, but apparently you're afraid to look!"

Ronald scowled. He had been trying to induce the Misses Gates to send Doris and Kitty away before they thought of bringing up again the subject of the lost property. He realized that the girls had it in their power to place him in an extremely awkward position. He hoped to bluff his way through by appealing to the sympathies of the two ladies.

Cora and Henry paled as Doris reminded Azalea and Iris of the suitcase. The housekeeper trembled and clung to her husband for support.

"Just look at them," Ronald declared. "They're crushed at the accusation against their good names. Here they have served long and faithfully and now these girls try to brand them as thieves!"

"Oh, Ronald, we aren't branding any one," Iris said at the point of tears. "We only want to get at the truth."

Doris and Kitty were at their wits' end. In every manner possible they had tried to convince the Misses Gates of their innocence, but they realized that no matter how strong was the case against Ronald Trent, the ladies would give him the benefit of the doubt. Only positive proof

would shake their faith in him, for in their minds they had built up a dream man. It was difficult for them to see Ronald in his true colors.

Realizing this, it seemed to Doris that the best thing the girls could do would be to leave the mansion at once. Perhaps later, the Misses Gates would realize their error.

"We have caused you enough worry and pain," she said quietly. "Kitty and I will pack our things and leave at once."

"But our lost papers!" Iris half sobbed.

"We can only tell you what we've said before," Doris declared. "You'll find them in Henry's suitcase!"

"I don't see why we shouldn't look, at any rate," Azalea murmured. "Ronald, don't you think it would be the best way to clear up this frightful muddle?"

"I wouldn't give that much credit to the trumped-up story," he returned condescendingly. "My dear ladies, don't take this matter so seriously."

Azalea eyed him with the first glimmer of distrust.

"After all, it happens to be *our* papers that are missing," she told him tartly. "I think we shall have a look inside that suitcase!"

Cora and Henry, now thoroughly frightened, began to back toward the door.

"Where are you going?' Azalea asked sharply.

"We are leaving," Cora told her sullenly. "We won't remain in this house to be insulted!"

"You'll not leave until we have examined your suitcase," Azalea retorted, displaying more spirit than the girls had known she possessed.

"You'll not find any papers there!" Henry cried. "Not unless these girls framed us!"

"That's probably just what they did do!" Cora chimed in, catching at the straw. "I'll bet they put them in our suitcase, so as to throw suspicion on us."

"We'll soon know if the papers are there or not," Azalea declared.

Realizing that they could no longer bluff, Henry and Cora of one accord started for the door, hoping to escape. They were abruptly halted by a steel-like voice.

"Stand where you are!"

Doris and Kitty wheeled, to see Jake barring the door. And directly behind him stood Marshmallow and Dave!

CHAPTER XXV

VINDICATION

Doris had never seen Jake look as he did at this moment, when he faced the group in the room. Ignoring Cora and Henry after his first command to them, he walked directly over to Ronald Trent.

"Your game's up, Joe Jeffery," he said in a hard, metallic voice. "We've got you cold. I've been waiting a long time to get even!"

Ronald stared at him a full instant and then, with a dazed expression, sank limply down into the nearest chair.

"You win," he muttered weakly.

Doris ran quickly to Jake and caught him by the arm.

"Who is this man?" she cried eagerly.

"The police know him well enough," Jake grunted. "There's a reward of five thousand out for him!"

"Five thousand!" Iris gasped. "But what has he done?"

"Swindled folks out of their hard earned money. He's been workin' his little game for years!"

"And to think he might have robbed us, if it hadn't been for Doris!" Azalea murmured. "Oh, what silly fools we've been!"

"You weren't the first to be taken in by him, ma'am," Jake responded. "He's a slick one. Took me in once, but this is where we'll square accounts." He indicated Cora and Henry. "Who are these folks? Friends of his?"

"Yes, they're all in the plot," Doris cried.

Henry did not deny the charge this time. Instead, he made a sudden dash for the door. Marshmallow and Dave were too quick for him, however, and caught him roughly by the arms.

"Oh, no, you don't," Dave said grimly, forcing him back. "You'll stay here until we're through with you."

"What's he been up to?" Jake demanded gruffly.

"He took some valuable papers belonging to the Misses Gates," Doris declared. "Kitty and I are sure he put them into his suitcase, intending to get away some time today before the loss was discovered."

"Let's have a look at that suitcase, then," Jake directed.

"I'll get it," Doris cried.

She and Kitty hurried up to the third floor and entered the Sully apartment. Etta was sleeping and they did not awaken her, but quickly took the suitcase from beneath the bed and carried it downstairs.

Removing the articles of clothing, Doris took out the two envelopes and handed them to Iris. She

ripped them open and brought to light negotiable oil bonds, an important deed, and several other papers.

"I'm glad we have them back," she sighed in relief, "but I can't understand why any one would wish to steal them."

"Let me see one of those bonds," Dave said.

Iris handed over one of the certificates. He studied it for an instant and then gave a low exclamation of astonishment.

"Why, these are Standard Condonite!"

Seeing that the name meant little to the Misses Gates, he hastened to explain.

"Standard Condonite is one of the new oil companies that has been growing like a mushroom. The stock has tripled in value during the last year!"

"Then our bonds really are valuable!" Azalea exclaimed. She looked accusingly at Henry and Cora who had the grace to hang their heads. "You knew this!"

"That man put us up to stealing them," Henry muttered, indicating Ronald Trent.

"But I don't understand how you knew we had them," Iris murmured in bewilderment.

"My wife heard you and Miss Azalea talking one day and you mentioned your bonds," Henry offered. "We didn't think anything more about it until that man Trent came here. He gave us

money to tell him what property you had. He wanted us to git this stuff for him. Said he'd give us part of it."

"And you thought you'd hog the whole of it," Trent added bitterly. "You were planning to get away before I got wise to your scheme."

"I'm afraid there's no honor among thieves," Doris observed dryly.

"If only we had back the money we gave away!" Iris said regretfully. "We need it so badly."

"How much did you give the rascal?" Jake asked bluntly.

"Nearly eight hundred dollars in all. Only yesterday we went to the bank and drew out five hundred. It was practically our last cent."

Jake crossed over to the swindler and jerked him roughly out of the chair into which he had slumped. Quickly he went through his pockets and brought out a fat billfold. From this he extracted a number of bills which he placed upon the table.

Eagerly Azalea and Iris counted the money. In all it came to five hundred and fifty-two dollars.

"I'm afraid that's all you'll get back," Jake told them. "He's likely spent the rest."

"It's better than losing everything," Azalea declared gratefully, "and we have our bonds which we can sell."

"What do you want done with these birds?" Jake next asked. "I have a private grudge with

Jeffery so he's going to jail, but you can do what you please with the other two, for all of me."

Azalea and Iris looked doubtfully at each other, and the Sullys, observing their indecision, began to plead for their freedom.

"We didn't mean to steal," Cora said tearfully. "You've always been so good and kind to us. For the sake of little Etta—"

"It seems to me you haven't considered her yourself until now," Azalea interrupted. "However, we are not without sympathy even for those who have plotted against us. Cora, I feel that you have allowed your husband to lead you astray. Your mother worked for us a number of years and I promised her that I would try to see that you never came to grief. For that reason Iris and I shall permit you and your husband to go free, providing you promise to lead a straight life from this day on."

"We promise," the two murmured together.

"Then take your things and leave the house immediately. You have demonstrated that you are unfit parents, so Etta must be left behind. You may go now."

Cora and Henry, without a word of thanks, rushed out of the room. Within half an hour they had left the house.

"Now I'll be gettin' this fellow out of your way," Jake declared briskly.

"Just a minute," Iris said quietly. "You're quite sure there can be no mistake. This man is really Joe Jeffery and not Ronald Trent."

"There's no mistake, ma'am. He's just an impostor."

"But how did he ever learn of John Trent?" Doris demanded. She turned to Ronald. "What do you know about my uncle?"

"Please tell us," Azalea begged. "It will mean so much to know."

"Go to Cloudy Cove and find out for yourselves," he snapped, forgetting that he had ever treated the twins in a courtly manner.

"Oh, but we are too old to travel," Iris sighed. "If only we could find out what became of John!"

"I'll go," Doris volunteered.

"How kind of you!" Azalea murmured gratefully. "You've done so much for us already. I don't know how we can ever repay you."

"I'm not looking for pay," Doris returned with a smile. "I'll be glad of an opportunity to look into the matter for you."

Her promise was not an idle one. Very shortly, Doris and her friends were to go to Cloudy Cove, there to learn more of the details of John Trent's strange career. Her adventures in this connection are related in the volume entitled, "Doris Force at Cloudy Cove, or, The Old Miser's Signature."

Jake telephoned to the police station and within

fifteen minutes the officers arrived to take charge of Joe Jeffery. They positively identified him as a notorious swindler and assured Doris and her friends that the reward money would go to them.

"I think Jake and the Misses Gates should have it," Doris declared. "The money will make up for what Ronald took!"

"Oh, we wouldn't think of taking it," Azalea and Iris protested. "You and your chum were really responsible for capturing the man. You saved our money!"

"I didn't do anything," Jake protested. "I just came here as Doris asked me to, and then when I saw that bird I recognized him. I don't want any money."

"What a situation!" Doris laughed. "Five thousand dollars and no one wants it!"

"Say, I have an idea," Marshmallow broke in.

"Unburden yourself," Doris laughed.

"Well, since no one of you is willing to accept the money, why not divide it equally among you?"

"Doris should have the greater share, though," Jake protested. "She was the one who was responsible for solving the mystery."

"But you landed the *coup de grace,*" Doris insisted.

Jake scratched his head and grinned.

"The which?"

"*Coup de grace*—that's French. It means the finishing stroke."

"I reckon Joe Jeffery is finished all right," Jake agreed. "He won't try to swindle any more people out of their hard earned cash."

After considerable discussion it was decided that the reward money should be divided between Doris, Kitty, the Misses Gates and Jake. The Misses Gates declared at first that they would accept no share, but Doris and her friends, realizing how badly they needed ready money, insisted that they take it. At last they gave in.

"We didn't do a thing to help bring Ronald—I mean Joe Jeffery to justice," Azalea murmured. "We even hindered you, Doris, thinking you were prejudiced against him. It doesn't seem fair that we take anything."

"If you and your sister refuse your share, then I'll not take mine either," Doris told her.

"Let us take one share between us," Iris protested.

Doris shook her head.

"No, we must share alike. It makes easier arithmetic, too. An even thousand dollars apiece."

"A thousand dollars!" Kitty gasped. "Am I actually to get that much? I think I'm going to faint!"

"Go ahead," Marshmallow invited impudently. "I'll catch you."

"Two thousand dollars," Azalea murmured, and looked almost tearfully at her sister. "It *will* mean a great deal to us."

"Then you accept?" Doris asked.

"I suppose we must, but only on one condition."

"And what is that?"

"That you accept a reward from us."

"Another reward!" Doris gasped. "One is sufficient."

"We don't refer to money," Iris said. "This is just a token of our appreciation." She hesitated, and then went on with a brave smile. "Azalea and I would like you to have the ruby ring."

"To keep?" Doris questioned in amazement.

"Yes," Iris returned quietly. "You understand why we cannot wear it ourselves and you admire it so much."

"I never dreamed of owning such a lovely ring!" Doris gasped in delight. "Why, I am sure it is very valuable, too. I really don't like to take it."

"Please do," the twins begged. "We have no wish to keep it in the house, now that—well, you understand."

Doris became aware that Kitty was nudging her vigorously in the back and recognized it as a hint that her chum hoped she would accept the gift. She debated an instant and then smiled.

"I can't begin to thank you for it," she told the Misses Gates gratefully. "It will serve to remind

me always of our thrilling adventure here at Locked Gates. And if ever the time should come when you want it back—"

Azalea shook her head.

"That time will never come, my dear. It is yours with no strings attached. Beautiful jewels were meant for young girls."

"The ring is so beautiful I'll be afraid of losing it."

"You can have it reset," Azalea suggested.

It was some time before Doris thought about asking Jake if he had brought the money which she had requested.

"No, I didn't," he confessed. "When I received your message, I thought something was wrong, so I just left the money in the bank and brought Marshmallow and Dave instead."

"I'm glad you used your own judgment," Doris assured him, "although I never would have lent that man my money when it came right down to it. Now my bank account is still intact, and I'll have another thousand to add to it. I guess Uncle Wardell will think I have the makings of a business woman!"

Doris and Kitty planned to return home with Jake and their friends, but the Misses Gates would not hear of them departing until after luncheon. After the excitement had died down and all questions had been satisfactorily answered, the girls

escorted Jake and the young men about the grounds. Kitty and Marshmallow made excellent use of the opportunity to strengthen their acquaintance.

At one o'clock the Misses Gates served a delightful meal in the garden. Since Cora and Henry Sully had departed in great haste, the twins had been forced to prepare it with their own hands, but this they insisted was an honor and a pleasure. In spite of all that had transpired, it seemed to Doris and Kitty that Azalea and Iris were far happier than they had been a few days before.

Doris had not forgotten Etta Sully and wondered what was to become of her. She intended to bring up the subject but, before she could do so, Azalea mentioned it.

"Iris and I have been talking it over," she said to the group after luncheon was over, "and it seems to us that Etta should be sent to a special home for cripples. She will need medical attention and of course her education has been sadly neglected. We have decided to use the reward money for that purpose."

"That will be lovely of you," Doris declared.

The girls insisted upon helping with the dishes and, as Marshmallow and Dave volunteered as "second assistants," the work was dispatched with rapidity and a great deal of fun.

"I declare, I feel ten years younger with so many

young people around," Iris laughed. "We'll hate to see you leave, Doris."

"You will come back often, won't you?" Azalea pleaded.

"Oh, Kitty and I shall be driving this way often, I'm sure," Doris returned.

Not until late in the afternoon did the party take leave of the Misses Gates. The twins accompanied them to the car which was to take them back to Chilton, and waved until they rounded a corner and were lost to view.

"You know, after you accustom yourself to a place, it doesn't seem so spooky," Kitty commented as they rode slowly along the street. "I can honestly say I've learned to like Locked Gates."

"It's like olives," Doris laughed. "The first taste is rather unpleasant."

"I guess you didn't know what you were getting into when you went there, did you?" Marshmallow asked. "Doris, your Uncle Ward will certainly be surprised when you tell him all that has happened to you."

"And won't he be delighted to see me coming home with reward money!" Doris exclaimed. "He was a little afraid this trip would prove an expensive one. As a matter of fact, it's turned out to be an investment."

"It was certainly the most exciting three weeks

I ever spent," Kitty said with a blissful sigh. "I enjoyed every minute of it."

"So did I," Doris agreed. "From now on, we won't be always wondering why the mansion gates are locked, either."

"Hardly," Dave grinned. "You've unraveled all the mysteries and unearthed all the secrets."

"Not quite all," Doris corrected. "I must find out about my Uncle John Trent's estate, and something tells me it may offer difficulties."

"It may offer more than that," Dave replied soberly. "Doris Force, when you go to Cloudy Cove, you may discover you've inherited a fortune!"

THE END